

## Handicrafts of Evil: The Make-Culture of Folk Horror

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What does craft activity mean for the reiteration of folk-culture? This chapter argues that craft represents part of the ‘skewed belief systems and morality’ (Scovell 2017) apparent in Folk Horror narratives and traces this back to the British love/hate, value/trash, upper/lower class rifts and shifts in how craft is viewed. During lockdown there has been an uprush of crafting from the general populace. Along with an odd ‘moralising’ tone about making (usually slightly rubbish) crafted artefacts, the relentless drive towards ‘well-being’ seems to have gone somewhat off course. In 2001, Bill Brown coined the term ‘Thing theory’ (2001: 4). Things, he argues, serve ‘to index a certain limit or liminality to hover over the threshold between the nameable and unnameable, the figurable and unfigurable, the identifiable and the unidentifiable’ (2004: 4–5). This chapter examines made the ‘things’ in folk horror that not only ‘hover’ over the gaps between the tangible and the nontangible, but which smash through the fabric of the supernatural into the realm of the real: the actual and the material.

In horror texts, material objects, particularly ‘made’ objects are often malign, evil, and cursed; things that humans should have no truck with. And, instead of a concept of ‘wellness’ in relation to craft, there is terror, death, and horror. Serial killers are often depicted as crafting. Consider Buffalo Bill in *Silence of the Lambs* carefully stitching a skin-suit by the light of a lamp, pouring over his craft with meticulous care. His victims matter only in that they provide material for his craft project. Think of the ‘Ice Truck Killer’ in *Dexter* or the ‘Miniature Killer’ in some of the classic *CSI* episodes. All skilled in both craft and murder. Even Leather Face in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* must have indulged in some kind of craft exercise. Yet across the horror genre, craft is most common, elaborate, and sometimes beautiful in Folk Horror. The fetishes and ritual objects of Folk Horror are all crafted and sewing, weaving, carving, and carpentry feature heavily in Folk Horror texts. Folk Horror involves a ‘make-culture’. The very wicker man construction is a crafted piece of work. The whole genre is saturated with things and craft—the making of objects—is an important part of the iteration of ‘folk’ culture.

Adam Scovell asks of the concept of ‘folk’, ‘is it the practise of a people or community; the elements of ethnographic tradition? Is it the aesthetics of such practices and the natural ancestry of the visual and thematic elements that accompanied them?’ (2017: 6). In folk horror, monsters make things: aesthetic objects that involve, time, care, and often skill in craft making. These objects may be part of an ‘ethnographic tradition’ (see so much of the art and object making in the *Midsommer* community for example), or there may be elements of ancestry, family, and heritage making (who made the furniture from human remains in Leather Face’s house?). Folk art and craft are a running motif in folk horror, and one that has not been fully explored. This chapter will examine some of this crafting, arguing that ‘bad’ (as in evil) craft is an intrinsic part of folk horror, even when it is not obvious and merely slides its way into the background. Considering this make-culture across the Folk Horror tales of M. R. James before taking the discussion right up to date with the horror film franchise *Jeepers Creepers* and finishing with Folk Horror films of Ari Aster, this chapter interrogates the evil that is handicraft.

### **‘I wish I’d left it alone’: Ancient Crafted Objects**

H. P. Lovecraft writes,

The joy we take in even the ugliest and most grotesque of traditional objects [...] is not a false one. It is ... truly aesthetic in an indirect way; through the ... historic and cultural symbolism of the objects. Such objects even when intrinsically unbeautiful, form an invaluable sort of springboard for the imagination. (quoted in Evans 2005, 101)

Traditional, crafted objects have always formed a part of Folk Horror. Evidence of ancient craft most usually bodes ill. These objects are wrong, human-crafted artefacts that are unearthed, dislodged, or picked up by the ‘outsiders’ who are destined to be victims. Across the world of Folk Horror, crafts, including carvings, hand crafted weapons (daggers, sword handles, knives etc.), fetish objects, cave paintings, and illustrations are all very popular. The ‘father’ of Folk Horror, M. R. James, often uses hand crafted objects to usher in the horrors that await the too curious or the unwary. The most famous is the ancient, bronze whistle of ‘Oh, Whistle, and I’ll Come to you, My Lad’. The ‘young, neat, precise’ (1992, 65) Professor Parkins unearths it from a manmade hiding place in the ancient ruins of a Templar’s church on the desolate Suffolk coast. Parkins pokes about and,

As he withdrew the knife he heard a metallic clink, and when he introduced his hand it met with a cylindrical object lying on the floor of the hole. Naturally enough, he picked it up, and when he brought it into the light, now fast fading, he could see that it, too, was of man's making – a metal tube about four inches long, and evidently of some considerable age. (1992, 69)

Parkins not only dislodges it, he picks it up and puts it in his pocket. Almost immediately, through the twilight gloom he makes out,

the shape of a rather indistinct personage, who seemed to be making great efforts of catch up with him, but made little, if any progress. I mean that there was an appearance of running about his movements, but that the distance between him and Parkins did not seem materially to lessen. (1992, 69)

Spooked, Parkins returns to the hotel and after dinner he examines his prize. 'It was of bronze, he now saw, and was shaped very much after the manner of the modern dog-whistle [...]. Why surely there were marks on it, and not merely marks, but letters!' (1992, 70-1). Parkins rubs the whistle and is confronted with the legend inscribed in Latin which translates as 'Who is this who is coming?' (1992, 71). And then, most injudiciously, Parkins blows the whistle.

The scenario is similar to that in 'A Warning to the Curious'. This story too is set on the East Suffolk coast. In this tale, it is Henry Long who does not heed the 'warning'. By the time the story begins, he has already acquired one of the ancient holy crowns of East Anglia that had been buried long ago to protect the land. A local family called Ager were set to guard it down the ages, but recently the last of their line had died, leaving the crown with no guardian. Long comes across the legend and becomes obsessed with finding the last holy crown. Although now, he tells his companions, 'I wish I'd left it alone' (1992, 310). However, Long persists in his quest, finds the barrow and digs for the crown. Throughout his activity was always someone watching and Long says as he was digging down 'if I hadn't been so keen I should have dropped the whole thing and run. It was like someone scraping at my back all the time' (1992, 313). As he lays hands on the crown, 'there came a sort of cry behind me – oh I can't tell you how desolate it was! And horribly threatening too. [...] And if I hadn't been the wretched fool I am, I should have put the thing back and left it. But I didn't' (1992, 313).

Long brings the crown back to the hotel, but he is hounded and tormented, and there is always someone just behind him. He asks his companions to help him to return the crown to

the barrow and shows it to them, entreating them not to touch it: ‘It was of silver [...] it was set with some gems, mostly antique intaglios and cameos, and was of rather plain, almost rough workmanship’ (1992, 312). The craft skill here is less sophisticated than that of the whistle, but the effect is similar: fear, threat, supernatural visitation, an almost complete disquieting of the mind of the transgressor and, in Long’s case, death.

Shane McCorristine writes,

as Jack Sullivan has noted, James’s over-educated characters have a void in their lives which they attempt to fill by collecting, investigating, discovering, digging up, or otherwise unearthing: The endless process of collecting and arranging gives the characters an illusory sense of order and stability, illusory because it is precisely this process which evokes the demon or the vampire. (McCorristine 2007, 58)

Collecting, unearthing, acquiring, none of these activities lead to good things in James’s work. The whistle and the crown are hand crafted objects, and there are many others strewn across James’s supernatural tales. There are scrapbooks, dolls houses, engravings, and carvings to name a few; all hand-made objects that ‘bite’. James wrote a short non-fiction piece called ‘The Malice of Inanimate Objects’. He says (with some humour),

In the lives of us all, short or long, there have been days, dreadful days, on which we have had to acknowledge that our world has turned against us. I do not mean the human world of our relations and friends [...]. No, it is the world of things that do not speak or work or hold congresses and conference. It includes such beings as the collar stud, the inkstand, the fire, the razor. (2017, 565)

James goes on to give a cautionary tale and begins to link it to a certain type of morality. He continues, suggesting that the ‘facts’,

Bear out my suggestion that there is something not inanimate behind the malice of inanimate objects? Do they not further suggest that when this malice begins to show itself we should be very particular to examine and if possible rectify any obliquities in our recent conduct? (2017, 571)

And, it may be worth also asking where did these ‘objects’ come from? They are not purely natural, they are ‘made’ objects (assuming James means a laid, domestic fire in his elucidation above). As Robert Michalski reiterates, ‘‘James’s ghost stories, testify to the strangely animate power of inanimate objects’ (1996, n.p.). He notes that, in several of

James's ghost stories there is 'the obtaining and the subsequent return of a cursed object', arguing that 'In James's tales objects cease to be autonomous, inert entities and become the active elements of a discourse that reveals the nature of the relationship between its producers and its "consumers"' (1996, n.p.). It is interesting that the very thing that should not be picked up is the object that is 'made'.

In the 'Craft Manifesto', posted on the website for the *The Journal of Modern Craft*, it states, Craft objects have a unique relation to the body; jewelry and clothing can be worn, cups and plates held. Furthermore, craft objects gather up the body for specific purposes, mediating the relationship between self and world. A ceramic mug full of coffee, lifted by the hand to the mouth, is part of a larger apparatus involving geology, ecology and evolution. Craft should revel in the ambiguity it grants to our notions of bodily autonomy and seek to create new human and non-human assemblages. (2013)

This suggests an affective, positive relationship between craft and the body. Craft mediates between the 'self and the world', bridging a gap, bringing the two together. If we posit the 'world' as 'nature' (which perhaps we can), then we can recall the edicts of Folk Horror modes. As Dawn Keetley notes 'Folk Horror embodies an explicitly ecological worldview in which human and nature, human and nonhuman, are thoroughly imbricated' (2020, 9). In craft it is the manipulation of 'natural' materials into objects that have some use and/or decorative value that melds the two together. In an article in *The Journal of Modern Craft*, Martina Margretts discusses craft as a slow process which embodies time. She says, 'both material and making mark out physical and mental space and time, but also uncover histories, both personal and collective, social and economic' (2010, 374). She continues, 'The materiality and processes of craft embody a narrative of lived experience. [C]raftworks are a repository of collective and individual memory' (2010, 376). Perhaps inevitably in a journal so titled, these are seen as positive attributes of craft: an invocation of the past, an uncovering of history and memory. However, if we apply these same attributes to Folk Horror and in this case, particularly to James's work, things reflect rather differently.

In 'A View from a Hill', an actual craft project goes quite horribly wrong. The craft project itself is a pair of field glasses (binoculars) made by hand by a man called Baxter. 'He was an old watch-maker down in the village and a great antiquary' (1992, 293) our narrator is told by

his host who judges them to be ‘more or less amateur work’ (1992, 293). Our narrator looks at them closely and decides ‘they are just the sort of thing that a clever workman in a different line of business might turn out’ (1992, 293). They carry the glasses with them on a walk and find an idyllic, rural spot to rest:

Across a broad level plain they looked upon ranges of great hills, whose uplands – some green, some furred with woods – caught the light of a sun, westering but not yet low [...]. Then they eye picked out red farms and grey houses, and nearer home scattered cottages, and then the Hall, nestled under the hill. The smoke of chimneys was very blue and straight. There was a smell of hay in the air: there were wild roses on bushes hard by. It was the acme of summer. (1992, 294)

And then, out of this natural beauty, in true Folk Horror fashion, comes the terrible thing. Our narrator, Fanshawe looks through the glasses and sees in the distance, a hill with a gibbet on it and perhaps something dangling from it. Yet when he looks with his naked eye there is just an empty hill. He looks again; ‘And now – by Jove, it does look like there’s something hanging on the gibbet’ (1992, 295). Yet when he cycles there the next day, there is just a wooded hill with no tower that he saw through the glasses, and no gibbet. This hill however, is called Gallows Hill. Fanshawe tells of his trip at dinner to an old servant who knows about the glasses. Fanshawe did not like his time on the hill alone, it seemed as if there were ‘indistinct people stepping behind trees in front of me, yes, and even a hand laid on my shoulder’ (1992, 300). He sees three large stones set in a triangle. The old servant trembles and says, ‘You didn’t go between them stone, did you sir?’ (1992, 300). But Fanshawe was far too spooked to do that. In fact, ‘as it dawned on me where I was, I [...] did my best to run. It seemed to me as if I was in an unholy evil sort of graveyard’ (1992, 300). The old retainer assents and tells his story of the crafter of the field glasses; Baxter who ransacked the neighbourhood for relics and pots for his collection. But his main project was making the glasses. As the servant Patten tells it, ‘he’d made the body of them some long time, and got the pieces of glass for them, but there some think wanted to finish ‘em’ (1992, 301). And that something was bones from Gallows Hill, boiled and liquified by Baxter and put into the base of the glasses. And as Michalski says, ‘Once [Baxter] makes the transition from the role of the relatively passive discoverer of cultural artifacts to the role of active creator, his effrontery to the spirits of the dead becomes too great for those spirits to bear’ (1996, n.p.). Indeed, eventually they bore away Baxter who was found in between the three great stones with his neck broken. Baxter performed forbidden craft work and it was his undoing. Hand

crafted objects were also the undoing of Parkins and Long who took them when they should have let them be.

### **The Folkloresque, and Monsters' Make Culture**

In an address given to the Folklore Society in 1996, Jacqueline Simpson said of M. R. James that 'he was something of a folklorist [...], with a particular interest in the development and persistence of local legends and historical memories, a good knowledge of traditional beliefs, and an interest in oral narration' (1996, 9). There are folklore elements in the tales discussed above as well as in many others. Indeed, in 'Oh, Whistle', Parkins is only saved by his neighbour Colonel Wilson's colonial knowledge of Indian folklore who 'remembered a not very dissimilar occurrence in India' (1992, 81) and who knew how to act. In just about all cases Folk Horror relies on, or perhaps rests on, folklore. This is as true in contemporary examples of Folk Horror texts as it was in James's time. The *Jeepers Creepers* film franchise (2001 – present) being a case in question. The films revolve around the murderous demonic figure of the Creeper. The films present the figure of the Creeper as an ancient folkloric monster, who rises every twenty three years to eat (people) for twenty three days before disappearing again. The Creeper, as they say in *Jeepers Creepers 3*, is 'ancient'. Keetley maintains that,

one central characteristic of Folk Horror is the presence of 'folklore' within [a] film's diegesis. [...] At the most basic level, then, Folk Horror is rooted in the dark 'folk tale', in communal stories of monsters, ghosts, violence, and sacrifice that occupy the threshold between history and fiction. The function of folklore in Folk Horror texts is complex, but it is nonetheless critical to the task of defining Folk Horror. [...] Indeed, Folk Horror is distinctive in rooting its horror in the local community bound together by inherited tales. (2020, 4)

The community in *Jeepers Creepers* know about the Creeper, or at least some of them do. There is an oral culture that passes on knowledge about the creature/demon and prepares the next generation to try to fight it.

The Creeper itself has been loosely associated with the 'real' folkloric, demonic Victorian figure, Spring Heeled Jack. This figure was often illustrated as having large black wings and

certainly the Creeper looks similar. Karl Bell describes Jack as the ‘Victorian bogeyman’ saying,

Spring-heeled Jack, [is] a historicised example of Gothic and folklore’s cultural dialogue and divergences in nineteenth-century Britain. Various described as a ghost, beast, or devil when he first terrorised Londoners in 1837–38, Spring-heeled Jack evolved from local folklore. (2020, 14)

Jack is a folklore figure. The element of folklore in the films lends coherence to the series of films (the next is due out imminently as I write), but also some sort of credence to the figure of the Creeper and the terrible events depicted. The films employ what Jeffrey A. Tolbert and Michael Dylan Foster identify as the ‘folkloresque’. This is a creative invention that mimics, echoes, or creates a new folklore ‘type’ of text. Although wholly made up and contemporary, Tolbert quotes S. Elizabeth Bird who argues that ‘certain popular forms succeed because they act like folklore’ (2016, 38). Tolbert continues, ‘This resemblance to existing forms of storytelling is the core of the interegrative mode of the folkloresque and remains powerfully appealing to popular audiences’ (2016, 38). This folkloresque element to the films adds a level of recognition to the story and folklore has always told tales of such supernatural beings.

Spring Heeled Jack was an urban figure, but the *Jeepers Creepers* films are set in rural America. The landscapes of the film are much more reminiscent of Folk Horror’s more usual terrain – fields, trees, rustic, isolated, and remote communities. There is a sense of the ‘backwoods’ as identified by Bernice Murphy in 2013 and communities that if they are not actively practising ‘skewed morality’ (Scovell 2017, 18), are perhaps under-educated. They are certainly superstitious, but in this case, with good reason. In an article entitled, ‘Fear of folk: Why folk art and ritual horrifies in Britain’ Alexa Galea says, ‘The use of the ‘folk’ aesthetic in the design of commodities demonstrates a wish to buy into the fantasy of the ‘picturesque’ and ‘rural idyll’, which encompasses fantasies of the culture and community of rural country folk.’ (82). In Folk Horror of course, this ‘idyll’ is distorted and turned on its head. James Thurgill writes,

Existing writing on Folk Horror has presented the topophobia of rural landscapes as a priori, suggesting that pastoral spaces are conceived of in the popular geographic imagination as inherently threatening. This suggests that, at their core, ‘countryside’ geographies are read as problematic spaces due to their perceived isolation and

backwardness, supporting the idea that modernization is both oppositional to the identity of rural communities and rejected by them. (2020, 34)

This anti-modern, perceived ‘backwardness’ feeds into the image of craft and crafting. Galea suggests that craft is what continually defines craft as a poor relation of art. Where art and *artisanship* used to be (at least sometimes) necessary, craft, she says is seen as lesser and less important. Yet in the *Jeepers Creepers* films, the ‘folk aesthetic’ is very apparent. The Creeper *crafts*. This is one important part of the folkloresque nature of the Creeper; it has an aesthetic sense, and indulges in folk art. In the first film Darry, a terrified teen enters the Creeper’s lair in the basement of an abandoned church. There he meets an appalling sight. The basement is decorated with preserved, dead bodies. Attached to the walls, naked, and staring forwards, these bodies are hard and glossy and stitched together to form a terrible type of tapestry. A wiki devoted to the *Jeepers Creepers* franchise has this to say:

While the Creeper's activities are largely focused on hunting, he is shown to have a twisted sense of aesthetics and sets aside time from his short 23 day-span of awake time to focus on creative endeavors. He makes grotesque art by sewing skin and bodies together, placing them on the walls and ceiling of his "home" as a form of decoration. He also carves pictures into the handles of his knives or attaches skin and teeth to his weapons in an attempt to decorate them. (jeeperscreepers.fandom 2021)

The author of the wiki has identified that the Creeper has assigned what must be termed as ‘leisure time’ to his craft projects. John Roberts, writing in the *Journal of Modern Craft*, points to the differences between ‘necessary labor’, ‘productive labor’ and labour that is part of ‘independent leisure’ (2012, 144). This demotes the notion of the labour of craft to a pastime or hobby. Galea argues that folk art is often seen as a ‘diluted’ form of culture that is not serious or important (77). She says folk art, ‘that threatens the predominant image of an idyllized and frivolous folk culture is marginalized, or othered to the extremity of the horror story’ (77). In relation to British culture she argues that ‘the conflicting images of British folk art and ritual as a picturesque and frivolous parade of craft and gesture; and one of an unpleasant, horrific and morally corrupting practice reveals a relationship of oppression and resistance; and a fundamental fear of the significance and meaning of folk artefacts and ceremonies.’ (96). The *Jeepers Creepers* films play on this fear albeit in a rural American setting.

The Creeper is surrounded by the handmade; all objects and decorations around him have been crafted and fashioned by himself. His weapons are handmade as is his truck. There are teeth and bones attached to his lethal spinning star weapon and in *Jeepers Creepers 2* it appears he has crafted in the flesh of his victim from the first film, Darry. Some of his weapons have beautiful carving. His truck is the item most associated with him and functions as one of the ‘terrible places’ that the Creeper occupies. Homemade again and hand crafted, it is a literal death trap. Each part, each weapon intrinsic to the truck, each defence contraption has been made personally by the Creeper. The truck can slice and dice and penetrate – it can maim and kill, but it has been constructed with care and attention. The Craft Council website cites a study that ‘showed that participating in sewing as a leisure activity contributed to psychological wellbeing through increasing pride and enjoyment, self-awareness, and ‘flow’ in younger women.’ We will come back to the gender aspect of crafting later. Here it is worth pointing to the ‘skewed’ relationship with crafting that the Creeper has. In the final scene of the first film, we see the Creeper crafting. In his terrible lair, decorated with preserved bodies, we see him sitting in candlelight bending over a sewing project, evidently absorbed and happy, with the Jeepers Creepers song playing softly on an old-fashioned record player. Here perhaps is wellbeing and ‘flow’.

The Creeper’s sewing project in this final scene is revealed when he rises from his workbench and we see the dead body of the eyeless Darry. The Creeper has removed his eyes, skinned him and crafted a mask out of his face. In relation to the Gothic, Marie Mulvey Roberts contends that it ‘depends upon the consensual formation of a monstrous alterity, whether it be vampire, ghost, demonic stigmatic or man-made monster’ (2016, 3). She continues, ‘it is the very idea of the monster that sustains social, economic and sexual hierarchies. The Gothic monster has been the rallying point for cultural, nationalist or religious hegemonies’ (2016, 3-4). This is the making of monsters from a position of power, albeit unstable and fractured, that turns those bodies deemed ‘foreign’ and ‘other’ into freaks and beasts. So, if we make monsters, what happens when monsters make? The Creeper has made a mask and he is not the only monster to do so. Masked monsters of various kinds are relatively ubiquitous, however there are only so many where the construction of the mask is important. In *Masks In Horror Cinema*, Alexandra Heller-Nicholas claims that, ‘horror film masks imply associations with broader notions of identity and there are complexities embedded in how they are both deployed and are understood over time: their symbolic

potency as objects linked to ritual, power and transformation' (2019, 1-2). In relation to crafted masks, ritual is important, but only as far as it feeds into the work of *construction*. Heller-Nicholas's work concentrates on the symbolism and power dynamics associated with masks in the horror genre, yet she has less to say about the fact that they are created, crafted objects which are made with intent. She notes that *Leatherface* has three different masks, named by the film crew, 'Pretty Woman', the 'Old Lady' and the 'Killing Mask' (2019, 99). The important thing to my argument is that he would have made each of these, carefully and meticulously, himself. In the same vein the serial killer Buffalo Bill in *Silence of the Lambs* carefully and joyfully crafts his skin suit, seated at his workbench expertly manoeuvring human skin through his sewing machine. Bill is described as 'very skilled'. As Clarice Starling emphasises, 'he can *sew*, this guy'.

If we return to the point made above by the Craft Council about young women and sewing, craft in general is often associated with female labour or perhaps more accurately, feminine hobbyism. Heller-Nicholas notes this as she argues that the construction of the masks evidences gender difficulties. In relation to *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* she says that,

the film suggests that patriarchy has cannibalised itself. On an unconscious level, the construction of the masks themselves supports this: [...] sewing is understood traditionally in the West at least as 'woman's work'. The materiality and production of *Leatherface's* masks link him to gendered craft traditions. (2019, 99)

Throughout the *Journal of Modern Craft* as well as in books like, *The Saturated World: Aesthetic Meaning, Intimate Objects, Women's Lives, 1890–1940* and *'Make It Yourself': Home Sewing, Gender, and Culture, 1890–1930* craft is seen as a woman's activity. This applies less to artisanship, and more to domestic craft which includes things like sewing, home decoration, and the (amateur) making of clothes. Reviewing these two books, Leah Dilworth writes that the texts show how 'home sewing for women of all classes and ethnicities reinforced certain traditional gender values having to do with motherhood, community, domesticity and femininity' (2010, 126). In *The Monster Theory Reader* there is a reproduction of Harry Benshoff's classic essay 'The Monster and the Homosexual' in which he claims,

many monster movies (and the source material they draw upon) might be understood as being 'about' the eruption of some form of queer sexuality into the midst of a

resolutely heterosexual milieu. By queer, I mean to use the word both in its everyday connotations ('questionable . . . suspicious . . . strange') and also as how it has been theorized in recent years within academia and social politics. This latter 'queer' is not only what differs 'in some odd way from what is usual or normal' but ultimately is what opposes the binary definitions and proscriptions of a patriarchal heterosexism. (2015, 227)

The crafting monster is also identified as 'queer' and there is a classic feminisation of the monster. Yet as Benshoff continues, 'Queer even challenges "the Platonic parameters of Being — the borders of life and death." Queer suggests death over life by focusing on nonprocreative sexual behaviors, making it especially suited to a genre that takes sex and death as central thematic concerns' (2015, 227). Crafting in Folk Horror skews gender concerns, as it skews discussions about labour and even about the 'flow' or 'well-being' that crafting is supposed to engender.

### **The Tiny, Flowery Worlds of Ari Aster**

If craft is identified as a (usually) feminine pursuit, it is worth pointing out that the crafting of Folk Horror is anti-domestic and can in many cases be seen to be sometimes anti-patriarchal. The homemaking involved in Folk Horror texts is entirely skewed – for example through the Creeper's twisted home decoration projects, or the domestic set up (including dinner making) at Leather face's house, where as Robert Spadoni notes there is a 'human-face lampshade and [a] sofa made from human bones' (2020, 719). One of the most disturbing and uncanny domestic scenes in Folk Horror film in relation to home-making are those that involve the miniature home-creation in *Hereditary*. Annie, (the mother), crafts teeny, tiny dioramas or models. Annie does this professionally, but also for herself, as some sort of trauma-catharsis. The opening scene begins in Annie's workshop, obviously an active working space filled with tools and materials and several doll's houses. We zoom in on one. The front is open and we can see inside the different rooms. It is an exquisite miniature with teeny tiny furniture; beds, carpets, lamps. Yet, in a truly unsettling scene, to open a film that is filled with unsettling scenes, as the camera pans in, this 'doll's house' becomes a real, living household. We focus in on one bedroom where a figure (a doll?) lies in bed. Suddenly the door opens and a man walks in to tell his son it's time to get out of bed, and we are 'in' the house at full size. This whole scene resonates with and has strong echoes of M. R. James's miniature

worlds in ‘The Mezzotint’ and ‘The Doll’s House’ (he himself equated these two stories). In *Hereditary*, as in the two James’ stories, there is a sense of the people in these miniature worlds being played and manipulated as puppets in a larger play, where the actions and outcomes are already prescribed, inevitable, and might even play out ad infinitum to entertain and satisfy some sort of distantly observing ‘audience’. As with the doll’s house and the mezzotint, the house in the miniature/reality is terribly haunted. There are layers of haunting in *Hereditary*, and they all focus around the home and the family.

In a fascinating article for *The Atlantic*, Katherine Fusco writes that,

*Hereditary* can be read as a cautionary tale about selfish women who sacrifice their family to their craft. [When] *Hereditary* later portrays actual devil worship, it doesn’t look so different from the forms of women’s art often dismissed as ‘crafts’: candle-making, jewelry-making, decorative wood-carving, and interior design (albeit in the form of a blood mural). Though Annie is not her mother, her work is used to hint to viewers that perhaps she’s a bit off as well. There’s something cold and controlled about Annie’s miniatures. These meticulous facsimiles of her world are the art of someone drawn to detail and who wants things arranged just so. (2018, n.p.)

Annie, is home-making, but if she is ‘making’ her own home, considering what happens subsequently something is really, terribly, wrong. Even this early in the film, Annie puts a doll-figure of her mother as a ghost into the tiny house, leaning over her daughter as she lies in bed. The dioramas Annie makes begin to haunt her dreams too. The objects she is crafting are excessive in their delicate, meticulous, über-detailing: they are uncanny, unsettling and filtrate into real life.

Bill Brown defines, ‘what is excessive in objects, as what exceeds their mere materialization as objects or their mere utilization as objects-their force as a sensuous presence or as a metaphysical presence,’ (5). Annie’s miniatures are excessive and they move beyond the material and even the metaphysical to embody the supernatural. Annie’s meticulous, delicate work has crafted an object that has no boundaries. Indeed, her craft work transgresses *all* boundaries we can imagine: between the living and the dead, between the real and the unreal, between the past and the future, between the acceptable and the taboo. The most shocking of Annie’s crafted miniatures is her recreation of the scene of her daughter’s fatal accident. Made with infinite care and attention, Annie adds paint detail to the tiny model of Charlie’s

severed head. This craft project though is framed as Annie's attempt as trauma self-therapy, or as Annie herself puts it 'a neutral view of the accident'. The crafting of the appalling tragedy seems an attempt by Annie to gain (literal) distance and perspective. Brown says that particularly in a materialistic, Western culture, "Formal truths" about how things are part and parcel of society's institution hardly help to explain the ways that things have been recast in the effort to achieve some confrontation with, and transformation of, society' (2001, 12). Perhaps if Annie can build Charlie's accident scene, she can somehow unbuild it too. *Hereditary* however rolls on inexorably, and the crafting in the film changes as black magic figurines prefigure and accompany the devil worship that the film ends with.

*Hereditary* is steeped in trauma and the craft practices evident in the film are deeply imbricated in the expression of and attempt to alleviate trauma. *Hereditary*'s craft moves backwards, from the contemporary dioramas constructed by Annie, some of which are professionally made and intended for an art exhibition, to the older crafts associated with Devil worship. This blending of old and new craft is also evident in Aster's later film, (intended to be a Folk Horror film), *Midsommar*. The film focuses on a traditional and very old midsummer festival, set in an extremely remote and cut-off Swedish village, the home of the Hårga tribe (or cult). There is a mix of ancient crafted artefacts, revered and treasured, and a current re-creation of old craft practices by the new generations – baking, making, decorating, and arranging. Robert Spadoni, in the evocatively titled article 'Midsommer and Thing Theory' states that in recent decades, Sweden has sought 'to reclaim and revitalize its national heritage by casting a nostalgic eye to folkloric traditions. In fabric, glass, furniture, and other applied arts, Swedish modern design artists interwove and celebrated images of nature, tradition, and mythology' (2020, 711). *Midsommer*'s crafting enacts tradition and reinforces cultural specificity. It is the rural community that matters, and those from outside are, within its ideologies and practices, fair game as sacrifices to this community and the continuation of its way of life. As Spadoni argues,

Midsommar fits snugly into Folk Horror, as the clashes these films stage—between citizens of the modern world and pockets of society that cling, lethally, to ancient beliefs—invite meditations on rural versus urban peoples and landscapes, and pre-Christian versus Christian ideologies, considerations that can quickly open out to wider reflections on patriarchy, gender, sexuality, class, race, and other cultural matters. (2020, 713)

One of the main markers of the specific identity of this community/cult is its own make-culture, featuring prominently in its folk art practices. Much of the decoration in the communal spaces (such as the dormitory) is ‘primitive’; paintings depicting, (if you look closely), indications of the horrors that are to come. ‘Decoration’ in *Midsommar* becomes as threatening and as much of an augury as the less subtle decorative flourishes covering the Creeper’s lair. If the Creeper too uses his victims as *material* for his craft practices, the villages in *Midsommar* adorn their sacrificial victims until they *become* crafted pieces of work. As Spadoni notes, ‘Objects do not keep to such subordinate roles in *Midsommar*, for [a] hierarchy the film upsets involves humans and things and their rarely challenged separateness’ (2020, 716). In relation to this objectifying and ‘thingness’ for humans, the main victim here is the protagonist Danni’s boyfriend Christian as he is sewn into a ‘bear suit’ and immolated. The making of this bear suit involved a family effort where Father happily instructed children in how to skin and gut a bear for just this purpose. However, the most beautiful crafting in *Midsommar* comes with their innovative and excessive flower arranging. The film ends with Danni, adorned, almost to the point of breaking, in a full, flowing, gown of flowers. The suggestion in the film is that Danni was always intended as May Queen, but it is a ritualistic honour and it is the role, and indeed the flowers themselves, that matter more. The gown she dons would have involved hours of work and she must have been sewn into it, as Christian too was sewn into his costume. The most delicately crafted ‘object’ though is Simon, suspended in the chicken coop awaiting his big ‘moment’. Simon appears to be floating, with flowers for eyes, and carefully flayed and gently undulating exposed lungs as ‘wings’, indicating life in a beautifully displayed body that must be suffering unendurable and unimaginable agony. Spadoni notes that in *Midsommar*, ‘humans start to look like things. [And] flowers move in ways that push them up the chain toward human beings’ (2020, 717-8). Simon is an object, but a crafted object that has been tended and displayed with utmost care.

Near the end of his essay Spadoni criticises *Midsommar*, citing its inauthenticity. He complains that,

the *Swedishness* of the Hårgas is a chimera made to fool the non-Swedish. [...] The film melds elements from Swedish folklore and legend – from the maypole dance to the cliffside murders of elder folk – with elements that derive from pure fancy [...]. Neither was Aster and his team all that fussed.

When Robert Eggers asks if he is correct in detecting Slavic influences in the villagers' costumes, Aster says that he is, and, yes, he also was some Elizabethan embroidery. Aster adds: "it's a stew". (2020, 723)

Spadoni is not happy with this. He likens *Midsommar* to a 'ride at Disney World, a quaintly, creakily artificial panoply of brightly dressed, happy foreigners singing to an endless stream of tourists', arguing that it indulges in a classic horror film 'Othering of foreignness' (2020, 723). This 'othering of foreignness' is a charge that is often targeted at Folk Horror texts. However, here I would argue differently and see the film itself as having been *crafted*. If traditional and contemporary craft practice can meld many disparate things together, why not a film? And it seems fitting that a film that is so saturated in craft practices and crafted objects, should, itself be a crafted piece of work: it is not a 'stew', it is a collage.

Sally Markowitz in 'The Distinction between Craft and Art', states that 'the charge of elitism rests on the claim that there is no real difference between art and craft objects, but only a difference in social status between artists and craftspeople' (1994, 66). In this article she turns to the Western Cartesian split between mind and body. Art, she argues is seen as cerebral, and of the mind, craft, is seen as coming from the body. In relation to the mind/body dualism she says,

Some critics charge that dualism expresses Western culture's 'somatophobia,' or fear of the body, which has played a significant role in perpetuating ideologies of racism and sexism. On this view, dominant groups, intent on denying their own physicality, project it onto subordinate groups, whose members are then denied the capacity for rationality, moral judgment, or full human agency. Some theorists see the origin of this tendency in the historical division of manual from mental labor, including the division of labor between men and women. (1994, 68)

In conjunction with the class divide or hierarchical social positioning of art over craft, Markowitz takes these splits further to look at the Othering of certain groups; those who have, from a white, western, colonial point of view, always been associated with the body, specifically those of ethnic origin or women. Folk Horror's 'folk' are certainly 'othered'; very often lower class, tribal, or represented as being 'backward' in some way. In this way, ideologically the elitist view of craft fits perfectly here. In terms of art practice and craft, if art comes from the mind, and craft from the body (at least within certain ideological

viewpoints), then craft is indeed the perfect medium for horror and perhaps Folk Horror in particular. From the ancient horrors crafted by sacrificial and bloodthirsty tribes to those groups practising 'old' religions or following ancient traditions, Scovell's identified 'skewed belief systems and morality' (2017, 17) will help to prove why, in Folk Horror, handicraft is indeed evil.

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