

In this paper I would like to discuss three now little known, or rather cult horror movies (depending on your taste and field) made in the U.K.. I'd like to discuss them in relation to how their characters and how their plots can be explored in relation to the landscape in which they take place, and to the protagonists' countercultural attitudes and appearances and the particular political world in which they were produced. Each features an unearthing or haunting of their landscapes as a political act, as central to their narratives.

The Three movies, **[SLIDE]** 1972's Death Line (or Raw Meat), **[SLIDE]** 1974's The Living Dead at the Manchester Morgue (or Don't Open The Window, Let Sleeping Corpses Lie, or Non si deve profanare il sonno dei morti), **[SLIDE]** and 1973's Psychomania (or The Death Wheelers) are, seemingly very different in terms of their setting, the type of horror, the production and their scope. However, I would argue that not only have **"critics and distributors 'historically mishandled our Gothic heritage"** (Perks, in Mayne 2017 p.3) but that they each share some thematic political and environmental elements that connect them. Themes that relate to the shifting counter cultural world of the early 1970s and their relationship to ecological threat, broader societal change and modern industrialism. These are NOT what are usually called Eco-Horror movies such as The Frogs, or Orca or Grizzly, or Phase IV, or Kingdom of the spiders which typically involve the evolution of animals and their subsequent turn against humans. Nor is it the main focus of the plot as in the Doomwatch movie or television series. Rather they are, shrouded in horror trappings, veiling stories about knowledge of the earth and the young people that appear closer to this knowledge and the earth itself than those representing authority at the time. After all, as... suggests, **"The emergence of environmental thought and green movements and parties was linked to the search for alternative forms of social life"** (Izak, K 2022p.399). All of these ecological warnings were part of a collective narrative that showed that...

**"Even mother earth herself seemed to be turning against us; ecological concerns were high on the agenda in the decade's early days [and this] led to a worry that we were trespassing on God's Domain." (p. 473)**

Perhaps culminating in Edward Abbey's 1975 Novel - *The Monkeywrench Gang*, itself then inspiring both eco activism but also the going of the term ecoterrorism.

But first some context on both the horror film landscape of the early 1970s and the counter cultural of the period in question.

Early seventies British horror **"was still labouring beneath the unwelcome weight of capes, canes and period piece blathering"** (Fenton, H & Flint, D Eds p.40). Hammer had scored its biggest ever box office hit in 1971 with a non Horror film and **"it struggled to find markets for its traditional horror films, despite attempts at beefing up their sexual content [SLIDE] (*Lust for a Vampire*, 1970) or updating familiar warhorses (*Dracula AD* 1972). Hammer eventually abandoned big-screen horror in 1976 (with *To the Devil a Daughter*)"** (Anon).

But quite quickly as the early seventies unfolded **"It's safe to say that the new wave of cinema was not kind to horror mainstays Hammer. Once the name in frightful cinema, with a proud legacy stretching back to the 50s and 60s, the legendary British studio suddenly found itself looking horribly creaky, outdated and, worst of all, tame, almost overnight."** (Brotherstone, S & Lawrence, D. (2017) p.473) Across the world however, horror, as a broader genre, was given a boost by 1973's *The Exorcist* and Italy was beginning a horror boom in the world of the Giallo movie and all that that would inform and influence. Things were definitely changing from the traditional to the more contemporary in terms of setting, plot and the representation of youth.

In terms of the counter culture, as Peter Shapiro puts it **"Dreams turned into disillusionment."** (p. x) There are those texts that suggest that the events of 1969 - both the Manson Murders and Altamont had changed the mood of broader society about youth culture more broadly and we can see a shift from the peace and love of 1967 to organisations such as the **"Symbionese Liberation Army and The Weathermen in North America and various organisations across Europe. Flower power wilted and turned into 'the year of the barricades' and 'groovy' 'peace' and 'love' were traded for 'up against the wall motherfucker'."** (Ibid)

In the UK, the Angry Brigade [SLIDE] had undertaken a series of bombings between 1970 and 1972 targeting a number of disparate political sites from the department of employment and

other governmental sites to more cultural targets such as the **[SLIDE] “bombing of the high street boutique, Biba and that of a BBC van the night before the Miss World Contest” (Weir 2017 p. 18)**

This of course shifted public opinion of youth protest and the counter culture. In perhaps the most visceral example will need me to go to American very briefly **[SLIDE] “a group of about 200 construction workers carrying crowbars and hammers descended on a gathering near City Hall of 1,000 students who were protesting the deaths four days earlier of four students who were killed by members of the National Guard at an antiwar protest at Kent State University in Ohio. Chanting ‘All the Way, USA’, they beat the protests with their helmets, tools and stet-toed work boots to the accompaniment of applause from the suited and tied executives of the brokerage houses which overlooked the square.” (Shapiro 2005 p. xvi)**

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So where do our films fit in to all of this social and political shift and change.

I’ll now describe each film in turn before returning to the themes of the landscape and the politics of counter culture and how they intersect and differ across the three movies.

Starting with Death Line, which is **“Considered to be one of the Great British Horror Films” (Matthews, S. 2016 p. 171)** even if it is little known now. The film stars Donald Pleasence as Inspector Calhoun **[SLIDE]**, a police officer that investigates the mysterious disappearances of people in London at Russell Square tube station. The explorations of class in the movie are evident when the investigation of numerous ‘green grocers’ and other normal people only become investigated when James Manfred a minister, an OBE, a, to quote inspector Calhoun in the film **‘a big shit.. ahem shot at the ministry’** goes missing.

A tube station seems a strange place for me to be talking about the landscape but, the narrative of the film goes on to tell us, the audience, that one of the companies building the historic underground in the late nineteenth century went bankrupt shortly after a collapse of one of its tunnels. A tunnel where workmen were digging, disturbing the earth, tunnelling and, with no money after the bankruptcy, the workers - eight men and four women - were simply abandoned to die in the landscape.

The horror, of course, is that they did not die but eventually turned to cannibalism and spawned more generations of cannibals who turned to abducting and murdering passengers from Russell Square Station to feed upon. Their only knowledge of English being 'Mind the doors', a phrase which becomes menacing later in the movie. There are lengthy shots of the abandoned tunnels and Director, Gary **"Sherman makes the Underground and the exploitation of its original builders symbolic of Britain's industrial past. Repeated shots of the crumbling masonry emphasise that if this historic Underground was originally built because Britain was a first world power, the country is now, like its transport system, in decline."** (Gullo, C. 2012)

It is our counter cultural protagonists - **[SLIDE]** Patricia and Alex, both students - who encounter James Manfred after he has been attacked, but before he is abducted. Patricia with her feathered early 70s hair and patchwork leatherjacket convinces the semi long haired Alex that they report the incident to the authorities who treat them with immediate disdain. Inspector Calhoun asking **"Why don't you hurry back to school. There might be a protest march worth fighting"**. Whilst the American student Alex is uninterested in the mystery, Patricia wants to investigate what happened to Manfred. Whilst they are portrayed sympathetically to us, the viewer, in bookshops, at plays and going to lectures, their unmarried cohabitation and general student-ness is frowned upon by the inspector, who taunts and questions Alex about his knowledge of economics.

Alex and Patricia's relationship is contrasted within the movie with the relationship between the last cannibal couple **[SLIDE]** throughout the film. At one point the OBE, Manfred is killed in a bloodletting by the character only known as "the man", to nourish his mate. Shortly afterwards in the film, Patricia turns up to see Alex bringing with her a symbolic bottle of red wine.

Eventually it is Patricia herself who becomes victim of the last cannibal, and it is Alex who eventually saves her, the police arriving after she would have been killed(?) and finding the underground lair of the cannibal clan who have been feeding on the underground passengers and solving the mystery of the missing people.

The Living Dead at the Manchester Morgue, directed by Jorge Grau, is an Italian Spanish co-production that has been summarised by Kim Newman as **"Flesh-eating ghouls roam the countryside; our heroes are caught between them and the knuckle headed police; and it's all the government's fault."** (Newman, K. 2011 p.21)

However, to expand upon that, in this film we also have a counter cultural couple as our protagonists - two city dwellers who love the countryside are thrown together by way of an accident on their journey to Windermere where George is hoping for a quiet weekend and Edna is visiting her Sister and Brother-in-Law who have moved to the remote location in an attempt to help the wife kick a heroin habit.

In this respect the relationship to the landscape is the most obvious of the three movies.

When George **[SLIDE]** goes off to get directions and encounters an experimental ultrasonic radiation machine being demonstrated to a local farmer as a way of killing insects and pests, Edna is attacked, but unharmed by a strange man whose description matches that of a recently deceased tramp.

Later that day the same tramp attacks and kills Edna's brother in Law and this is when the police are called in, with an inspector with a similar character to those in the other two movies, suspecting George of being involved despite his protestations.

George makes the connection between the ultrasonic ray and the seemingly dead tramp coming back from the grave but, of course, is not believed.

After this a series of skirmishes between George and Edna and the growing army of zombies seem only, to the authorities, to prove that they are some kind of Satanic serial killers. At one point the inspector utters the immortal line **[SLIDE]** *"You're all the same, the lot of you, with your long hair and faggot clothes, drugs, sex, every sort of filth, and you hate the police don't you' 'You make it easy',* replies George. As the zombie horde grows, eventually Edna succumbs to the

zombie disease when they go to the local hospital to try and explain. She is then killed by George only for George to then be shot by the police. **"As McCormick shoots Lovelock in the head, he sneers 'I wish the dead could come back to life, you bastard, because then I could kill you again.'**" (Newman, K. 2011 p.21)

In our final movie - 1973's Psychomania **"part deadpan comedy and part counter-culture symbolism"** (Matthews, S. 2016) p.173, which Nicky Henson, star of the movies claims was written by **"two expatriate communist sympathisers"** we are again faced with contrasting couples alongside another authoritarian police officer. This time we have - **"Chief inspector Hesselstine (Robert Hardy) is a straight talking copper from some indeterminable part of Northern England, cut from the same cloth as Donald Pleasence in death Line."** (Jones, M. (2001) p. 107) - our couples this time [SLIDE] are protagonists Tom and Abby, who head up 'The Living Dead' motorcycle gang and Tom's spiritualist Mother and her ageless and mysterious Butler, Shadwell.

Tom's father died whilst trying to gain immortality and Tom **"who wants to commit suicide to escape a world that has become boring"** (Jones, M. 2001 p.101) finds the key to coming back from the dead from his Occultist mother and the enigmatic Shadwell.

Again, this may sound like a strange film to be discussing in relation to the landscape. However, after successfully committing suicide on his motorbike at great speed, Tom is buried on his bike in a local stone circle by the rest of the Living Dead motorcycle gang. The mythology of the stone circle - the seven witches - is laid out. It is where the witches were turned to stone for, as Shadwell puts it **"breaking a bargain with superior powers"**. Tom, of course, the following day springs forward from the landscape, from within the stone circle, upon this bike and convinces all of the gang to do the same. All, that is, except Abby who is portrayed as timid and scared in opposition to the reckless Jane who briefly tries to take over the gang when they think Tom is dead.

After a strange and protracted section of the film where the gang's suicides are documented, [SLIDE] the undead gang begin to terrorise the locality without any fear. Where their vandalism

and speeding was how they got their kicks when they were alive, now they are immortal, they are truly '**blowing minds**'. And quickly murder a succession of people.

The mysterious Shadwell and Tom's mother realise that the Living Dead must be stopped and perform a black magic ritual to revoke a contract she signed with those "superior powers" when Tom was born. This act from her ends the immortality of The Living Dead and, whilst they try to convince Abby to join them, they all turn to stone and become a new part of the stone circle where they have regularly met throughout the film.. **"the film has a genuine folk horror feel."** (Toase, S. 2017)

Each of these films connects our mortality to the landscape. And each of these films show, beyond their differences, countercultural youth understanding this life/landscape connection and try to either communicate it to the outside world for change, or want to use this knowledge to enforce radical political change. Knowledge of the workings of the earth, and desire for this knowledge lies with the young. Yes, there are distinct differences. Only Death Line for instance, sees our Counter Cultural Couple alive and well at the end, only Abby survives Psychomania and George and Edna both perish. Each film has a different horror focus - Cannibals, zombies and the occult.

In Death Line, a film that the Daily Mail called **"The most horrible film ever"** (Mayne, L. p.3 2017) the perils and consequences of an economic and ecological uncaring capitalism on workers, both in the industrial revolution and then on contemporary London play out. Our hip students Patricia and Alex solving the mystery ahead of a police force preoccupied with their own micro -issues with technological progress - the shift from loose leaf tea to tea bags. However Laura Mayne suggests that the film **"played on our general anxieties about the cost of industrialisation and the logical outcome of capitalism"**. ( 2017p.11)

In the Living Dead at the Manchester Morgue, a film that challenges **"values of authority, heroism and religious faith"**. (Russell, J. In *ess-Cooke, C & Verevis, C. (Eds) 2010 P.15*)

Again the perils of capitalist and scientific interference on the landscape, on ecology for the sake of the economy is catastrophic. The protagonists 'long haired' George and Edna are the ones that spot this and physically and verbally try and stop the Zombie apocalypse from happening, putting themselves in mortal danger to save the world. Their efforts thwarted by the **"Right Wing Sergeant McCormick"** (Burrell, 1996 p. 28) at every turn.

The politics of this film, in part - beyond its gore, lead to its inclusion on the video nasty list in June of 1983 by those that Burrell claims were **"frothing at the mouth with self-righteous Christian indignation at the apparent Godless-ness of 'Modern' youth"** (ibid p. 30)

Psychomania, whose screenplay was indeed written by an American playwright whose name was on the Hollywood Blacklist of communist sympathisers, the movie here where the warning of abusing this knowledge of the land, the landscape - esoteric or not - are laid out, the landscape wins. The stultifying boredom of 70s life gives way to subcultural activity in the shape of a motorcycle gang. When mixed with esoteric knowledge and ritual within the landscape, the gang, and youth culture more broadly becomes an unstoppable destructive force itself... one that has to be stopped by a wiser, if still counter cultural sacrifice, by the older generation. The revolutionary plot, that echoes the attempts of the Angry Brigade of the undead passes by quickly in a short exchange between Tom, Tom's Mother and Shadwell that echoes the artwork of King Mob in their pre-punk/post situationist work **[SLIDE]**.

**Tom's Mother: What are you all going to do next**

**Tom: There's lots to be done. For starters, do you know how many Policemen there are, judges, teachers, preachers do-gooders.**

**Shadwell: Do you mean the entire establishment?**



## **Tom:Right!**

The politics of this movie are often overshadowed by its high camp. Much like the politics of *Death Line* and *The Living Dead at the Manchester Morgue* are overshadowed by the gore of marauding zombies and cannibals. But they are of their time.

Politically, both *Death Line* and *Psychomania* were being filmed during the trial of the Angry Brigade in the U.K. where ecological concerns were brewing and occult themes were appearing in children's television. *The Living Dead at the Manchester Morgue* came one year later - and its politics have more impact in the early nineteen eighties - a period when the Angry Brigade briefly made a comeback. I'd like to conclude this paper with a quote from John Barker of both situationist pranksters King Mob and the Angry Brigade. The British group whose bombings I discussed at the beginning. I'd then like to contrast that with the advertising line from *The Living Dead at the Manchester Morgue*.

**"Powerful People make decisions which affect the lives of thousands of other people with absolutely no consequences to themselves. People in power were making decisions which fucked up the lives of other people; and the whole thing was well, its going to have consequences."** (In Haslam, D. 2021p.54)

**slide. They tampered with nature, now they must pay the price.**

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