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Child Be Strange: A Symposium on *Penda's Fen*

The dramatist David Rudkin (b.1936) wrote the television play *Penda's Fen* in 1972-3. It was filmed by director Alan Clarke (himself acclaimed as an auteur in recent retrospectives) and screened as a 90-minute film in BBC television's *Play For Today* slot in March 1974. The play was repeated in 1975, then scarcely seen for another 15 years. Until the arrival of VHS recorders in the early 1980s, it was almost impossible for viewers to catch up with or re-view a piece of television unless they managed to be in front of the screen on the occasion of a repeat. In 1990 *Penda's Fen* was at last screened again, with an introduction from Rudkin, in a Channel 4 retrospective of the work of the influential producer David Rose. Now it was possible to record works of television that came recommended for their quality or rarity, and amateur VHS copies of *Penda's Fen* began to circulate. This was the basis of a gradual revival in interest in the play, which in the 2000s came to be seen as a significant instance of a certain cultural strand from the 1970s: put simply, an English uncanny. The play depicts the experience of teenager Stephen Franklin, living in a conservative household in the Malvern Hills in Worcestershire, whose stable assumptions are disturbed as he encounters a series of spectral figures, culminating in a meeting with Penda, the last pagan king in England prior to Christianity. As Stephen ventures through this mystical rural landscape, issues of sexuality and politics are also implicitly raised.

Following a DVD and Blu-Ray release in May 2016, the revival of *Penda's Fen* reached its peak with a high-profile screening at the British Film Institute on 10th June 2017, preceded by a whole day conference about the film, supported by the Birkbeck Institute for the Moving Image and Birkbeck's Centre for Contemporary Literature. The conference and screening were organized by Matthew Harle and James Machin, who both completed PhD theses in Birkbeck's Department of English & Humanities. They had assembled a full day of presentations about the film from speakers including David Ian Rabey, author of a monograph about Rudkin's drama, and Adam Scovell, whose recent book *Folk Horror* indicates one way to categorize the film. Given the traditional – but now certainly shifting – gender balance of fandom in cult TV and film, it was not very surprising that a majority of speakers were male; but substantial contributions were also made by three women scholars: Carolyne Larrington, a Professor of Old Norse at the University of Oxford, who among other things raised the question of the place of women in the film; Yvonne Salmon of the University of Cambridge, who spoke on the recent assembly of the canon of 'Occulture'; and Beth Whalley, a researcher from King's College London who brought expertise in medieval history to bear on this late twentieth-century work.

Birkbeck's Roger Luckhurst opened the day by situating *Penda's Fen* in a 'polytemporal 1970s' of texts that combine traces of different periods, suggesting that such combinations were often a response to periods of social crisis. Characteristically of his work as a cultural historian, Luckhurst did not discuss *Penda's Fen* in isolation but as part of a cluster of other texts from the period, including the 1977 children's TV drama *Children of the Stones* and the fiction of Alan Garner. Such texts became increasingly familiar reference points during the day, as an 'eerie' version of the 1970s materialized through the mists of cultural history. Recent ideas of sonic 'hauntology' and the comic period spookiness of Scarfolk Council are relevant co-ordinates, though they also risk anachronism in being

imposed on a work composed, as Luckhurst pointed out at the close of the day, from a richly educated post-war sensibility.

Speakers brought specific angles. Craig Wallace (Queen's University Belfast) compared *Penda's Fen* to other legends of sleeping kings who will return in times of crisis – not least King Arthur. Andy W. Smith (University of South Wales) set the play in the context of Manichean religion. BFI programmer Will Fowler and experimental poet Daniel O'Donnell Smith (another Birkbeck graduate) offered responses which were at times openly subjective and personal.

Carl Phelpstead (still another presenter based in Wales, quite suitably for the play's geographical setting and interest in Anglo-Welsh encounters) situated Rudkin alongside other writers, including Geoffrey Hill and, fascinatingly, J.R.R. Tolkien, whose Riders of Rohan were said to be based in part on Mercian history. Phelpstead's clear and erudite presentation was accompanied by images of the region today, lush and green yet also peppered with quirky details, taken by his brother on a research trip. Beth Whalley also showed us images of a trip to the real Pinvin, inspiration for the play. Her paper brought together not just a detailed account of the work itself and a comparison with Hill's King Offa, but also the natural history of fens as material environments, and new emphases on their social history in medieval times. In its interdisciplinary range Whalley's was one of the day's richest presentations.

Yet amid all this emphasis on the content of the play, I was particularly intrigued about another aspect: the play's place in the history of television and the institutions of the BBC. This was addressed by David Rolinson (University of Stirling), who explained that he had put together a day-by-day calendar of the entire creation of *Penda's Fen* – the kind of obsessively complete coverage one might just about expect with *Guernica* or *Citizen Kane*. Through research in BBC archives, Rolinson had unearthed extraordinary materials: letters from writer and director; details of a wrap party after shooting dubbed *Penda's Fun*; duty logs recording viewers' calls and letters to the broadcaster (often expressing dissatisfaction, in the age of Mary Whitehouse). Such material is a valuable addition to the discussion, giving us a salutary reminder of how the play's mystical aura was in fact generated by mundane work within conventions of television production of the time.

The event closed with a Q&A conference call to David Rudkin at his home. As his rich voice with its Ulster traces resounded through the darkened theatre, the effect was akin to a séance: an apt image of communication for this 'unburied' work.