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# Folklore/Cinema

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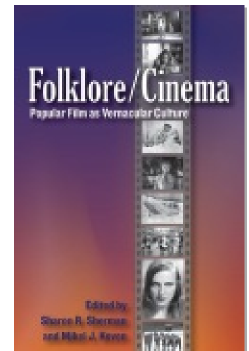


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# Introduction

*Popular Film as Vernacular Culture*

We both have been working in the areas of folklore and film studies for a number of years, and this current volume demonstrates that we are not alone in exploring the convergence of popular cinema and folklore. *Folklore/Cinema* first emerged out of our work on film and folklore for a special issue of *Western Folklore* (2005). When we edited that issue, we realized how much interest and work focused on this subject and that an audience awaited a book on it. Once we chose to move on to a book, we knew we would have no trouble finding high-quality essays to include. In fact, only one of the chapters comes from that issue of *Western Folklore*. It is reprinted here because of its particularly successful treatment of the convergence of film and folklore. Scholars are producing excellent work with direct interest for folklorists, film scholars, and those in disciplines that analyze the discourses of both film and folklore (for example, comparative literature, the arts, journalism, and European and other area studies).

The difficult balance we faced as editors was to ensure a double market/double audience for this book: these chapters needed to be sufficiently grounded in academic folkloristics and film studies to be of more than passing interest to readers in those fields. In many respects, this work seeks to broaden the dialogue between film and folklore studies in an environment where we can all learn from each other outside of the confines of our own disciplines. The eleven chapters in this collection are all concerned with exploring popular film and folklore, albeit from a number of different approaches and disciplines. This interdisciplinary approach allows us insight into a variety of academic perspectives; we are interested not only in seeing how folklorists see film but also how film scholars see folklore.

The title of the first section, "Filmic Folklore," reflects this convergence; the term comes from Juwen Zhang's contribution to our special issue of *Western Folklore*. Zhang coined the term as a response to Sherman's "folklore," folkloric," or "folkloristic" film, all of which she

uses synonymously. Such films focus on folklore as their central interest and are produced by folklorists or filmmakers for those interested in folklore. As Sherman notes in *Documenting Ourselves,*

> Folklore films combine the goal of the documentary to record unstaged events with the goal of the ethnodocumentary to provide information about culture. The folkloric film focuses primarily on traditions, those expressive forms of human behavior which are communicated by interactions and whose formal features mark them as traditional. The folklore film covers a wide range of traditional behavior, from rituals, ceremonies, folk art and material culture to games, sayings, and songs and to the lore of various peoples bonded by ethnicity, age, gender, family, occupation, recreation, religion, and region. (1998,63)

These films may be fairly obscure, such as the Seegers' Folklore Research Film Series (1956–1966), or as widely circulated as Stacy Peralta's *Dogtown and Z-Boys* (2001), created for a large audience with interests not demarcated as folklore but nevertheless falling within the parameters of folkloristics.

Naturally, such usage presupposed that the term applied exclusively to a particular type of *documentary* film, despite Sherman's coverage of some fiction features and their reflection of folklore content (Sherman 1996, 265). Koven's work, from an exclusive focus on the fictional feature film, has explored both the way popular film can behave like folklore (e.g., 1999) and what new discourses on popular films open up when they are viewed through the methodological lenses of folkloristics (e.g., 2003). As Sherman already laid claim to the term folkloric or folkloristic film to refer explicitly to a kind of documentary cinema, Koven's work avoids such a designation to define the terrain he works in. Zhang's term filmic folklore offers a fusion of the folkloristic study of popular fictional cinema that may include elements of the documentary folkloric film. As Zhang defines it,

> Filmic folklore, by definition, is an imagined folklore that exists only in films, and is a folklore or folklore-like performance that is represented, created, or hybridized in fictional film. Taken out of the original (social, historic, geographic, and cultural) contexts, it functions in similar ways to that of folkloristic films. Filmic folklore imposes or reinforces certain stereotypes (ideologies), and signifies certain meanings identified and consumed (as "the truth") by a certain group of people. The folklore in filmic folklore may appear as a scene, an action, an event, or a storyline (plot), and in verbal or non-verbal form. (2005, 267)

If, for Sherman, folkloric film is film acting as a folklorist, then filmic folklore presupposes folklore mediated through the filmic and asks how folklore is created via film. Thus, the term filmic folklore, as coined by Juwen Zhang, refers to a kind of artificial folklore-like phenomenon that only exists cinematically, that is, in fictional films. Filmic folklore may behave *like* "proper" folklore does, but it is entirely a construct for the camera.

The opening chapters address the postmodern problematizing of what Regina Bendix characterizes as the authenticity of experience. Gillian Helfield, Julie LeBlanc, and Rebecca Prime explore filmmakers' search for the authentic in places where folklore once emerged but authenticity now seems lost. Thus, through the medium of popular culture, the folkloric experience becomes a postmodern one.

Gillian Helfield's chapter documents the Québec cinéma direct movement in the 1960s. Helfield argues, in filmic-folklore fashion, that the 1960s vogue for authenticity within cinéma vérité, the revival of folkways, and the newly established outlets for Québécois culture to express itself (and, more importantly, *to* itself) coalesced in a series of short romanticized documentaries about folkloristic topics, much as early folklorists might have documented them. Her explanation of differences between American and French cinéma vérité and Canadian cinéma direct points to the distinctions filmmakers signified among these forms through how they thought the camera represented reality.

Québécois culture is also the subject of Julie LeBlanc, who analyzes the filmic fictional figure of "Elvis" Gratton as both folk hero and antihero. While filmmakers, through three short and (to date) three feature films, created the character of Elvis Gratton as a satiric assault on Canadian Federalism within Québec, he has become a vernacular cult figure. LeBlanc's astute writing gives us insight into the highly political and discursive world of these films. Gratton is actually what Richard M. Dorson would call a "mass-culture hero" (1959, 200), except, unlike other such heroes, he is not situated in a mass culture. He is known primarily to a small group of people in Québec and has thus acquired a type of "folk" status. The films are in French and mirror the Québécois culture back to French Canadians in Québec (we know of no one else, even in neighboring provinces, who has heard of Gratton). Like all folk heroes, he is heroic to a particular group—in this case, Québécois viewers of a certain generation.

Like scholars before her, LeBlanc draws upon Lord Raglan's classic definition of a hero (1936) to further her argument. In this way, she also raises questions regarding the oral, literary, and filmic traditions of

having a hero as the centerpiece of a plot. LeBlanc's heroizing of Elvis Gratton fits Zhang's definition of filmic folklore and puts a positive spin on what folklorists, such as Dorson, refer to as *fakelore:* behavior that is presented as traditional folklore although no traditional circulation exists.

The complicated search for the authentic continues in Rebecca Prime's chapter exploring the ideological role played by the German *Bergfilm* (mountain film) in both the Weimar and early Nazi periods, as a manufactured site for the authentic German *Volk.* This chapter not only reads these early films as ideological constructions but also situates their attempt to appropriate an identity as ethnography within the context of early cinema's pseudoanthropological desire to document the "other." These films are important on yet another level: that of Leni Riefenstahl as actress, a role that brought her to Hitler's attention. Taken collectively, the chapters by Helfield, Le Blanc, and Prime develop the implications of filmic folklore, identifying ways that these films seem to embody an "authentic" ethnographic experience.

The second section of this work focuses on transformation, which has long been a central theme of both folktales and popular films. In "PC Pinocchios," Holly Blackford looks at the structural connection between hero plots in science fiction and the genre's appropriation of the folkloric motif in *Märchen* of inanimate objects coming to life. In doing so, she draws upon Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* (1968) as well as Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk Literature* (1955–58). She finds the motif ubiquitous as objects that stand for characters become "real" by developing their own consciousness of their "lives." Looking at the computer/android as child across several science fiction films, including *AI: Artificial Intelligence, WarGames, Tron, The Computer Wore Tennis Shoes, Terminator 2: Judgment Day,* and *Star Trek: Insurrection,* Blackford identifies a metamorphosis motif where a child becomes computerlike and a computer/android becomes more childlike. This comparison, the author argues, is not limited to contemporary science fiction cinema; she also identifies the motif within several children's books, including *The Velveteen Rabbit* and *Pinocchio.* Like those children's classics, the films use the metaphor of human/nonhuman relationships to express a strong humanist agenda. In Blackford's analysis, the relationship between fathers and sons in these films in particular depends upon the way coming-of-age journeys are depicted.

Mark Allen Peterson explores a wide range of films in his chapter to note the differences between Arab (mostly Egyptian) and Hollywood depictions of jinn and genies, especially in the transcultural *Arabian*

*Nights* collections that move intertextually into European and American film and television and back into Middle Eastern media. Peterson contextualizes this transformation from Islamic demon to cartoon character within ideological Orientalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Particularly noteworthy in this chapter are Peterson's descriptions of a whole cache of largely unfamiliar horror films made in Egypt about jinn. He thus provides insight into Egypt's vernacular cinema, the ways these films reflect the belief traditions of their countries of origin, and the powerful influence on these Egyptian films of Hollywood narratives (ones that generally use the figure of the genie). In such films, wealth and power through wishes (such as those given by Aladdin's genie) become the central plot. As these figures work their way back into their own cultures, their folklore is transformed by the popular culture of the West.

How do contemporary ghost films draw upon intermediaries, such as priests or mediums? James A. Miller explores several recent films—notably *Ghost, Field of Dreams, Stir of Echoes,* and *The Sixth Sense*—that employ such intermediaries, all of whom are able to see ghosts. Rather than parodying the supernatural, as in *Ghostbusters* or *Beetlejuice,* the films Miller discusses portray what he refers to as a "vocational crisis" for those who can see and interact with the revenants. As functional figures, mediums have a vocational calling to address the dead and bring them from the past into communication with the living in the present. The movies' principal characters are obliged to act as helpers. Ultimately, Miller asks the ontological question of what it means to see the dead as cultural Other and how past and present register for the hero. As a section, the chapters by Blackford, Peterson, and Miller, all describe a common folkloric theme of transformation—the doll-that-comes-alive, the jinn, and the medium—and these authors explore this folklore topic across a range of films.

Our third section asks what new insights are revealed when cinema is looked at through the eyes of a folklorist. The chapters by Margarete Landwehr, Tarshia Stanley, and Carol Henderson each focus on a single film and explore its range of folklore using what Clifford Geertz (1973) has called "thick description," going beneath the surface to interpret complexity in search of meaning. Landwehr's "*Märchen* as Trauma Narrative: Helma Sanders-Brahms's Film *Germany, Pale Mother*" keeps within the folk-narrative tradition and employs Propp's *Morphology* (1968) to examine the film's use of "The Robber Bridegroom" story. For Landwehr, this traditional *Märchen* ties in with the film's themes of post-Holocaust trauma, particularly within New German Cinema. Unlike the more historical chapter by Prime ("A Strange and Foreign World"),

Landwehr's analysis explores the avenues for discussion opened up by contextualizing the film's use of the tale within the cinematic movement and in relation to national identity.

Tarshia Stanley, on the other hand, elucidates the role of the conjure woman in African American folklore and explains how filmmaker Kasi Lemmons treats this image in her highly regarded film *Eve's Bayou* (critic Roger Ebert called it one of the best films of 1997). The conjure woman has the ability to see both past and future and affect memory, spirituality, and identity. The present-day Eve is named after the slave woman Eve and inherits her powers. Eve's Aunt Mozelle also shares this gift. Elzora is a third conjure woman. Together these three merge to create a force in the bayou. Premonitions and reflections constantly shift as the three faces of the conjurer become one. In *Eve's Bayou,* the African American woman reclaims herself, according to Stanley, and survives as a storyteller, keeper of memory, and expression of power for African American women in the present.

Carol Henderson also discusses African American folklore in her analysis of the horror film *Tales from the Hood,* a portmanteau film that fuses the HBO television series *Tales from the Crypt* with *Boyz 'n the Hood*. The film's use of the horror genre, according to Henderson, reworks the traumas of black men in America. As in Miller's analysis of film's treatment of the medium who crosses barriers in time (chapter 6), and Stanley's study of the conjure woman who transcends time (chapter 8), Henderson demonstrates the "twining of life in the here and hereafter." *Tales from the Hood* intertwines the African American experience during slavery with the present-day through its central character, an old man who weaves stories and "witnesses" to save today and the future. He acts as both conjurer and trickster. The filmmaker examines the cultural fears of contemporary African American urbanites while employing and harking back to more traditional belief traditions.

This collection ends with two essays that consider how film examines questions of cultural identity. In her chapter about a medieval Danish murder-revenge ballad (that bears certain similarities with "The Robber Bridegroom"), K.A. Laity engages in a close reading of two very different film versions of the same story: Ingmar Bergman's *The Virgin Spring* and Wes Craven's *The Last House on the Left.* Bergman looks at morality, whereas Craven, setting his tale in the early seventies, attacks the assumption of moral behavior as an essential ontology. As in *Märchen*, the forest is a place where anything can happen. Both of these filmmakers use the forest to disrupt society. Laity's chapter exemplifies what we hope to establish with this book: a well-considered analysis of a film

with specific reference to its use of folklore and an eye on the cultural contexts of production and consumption which inform and are changed by human transmission and expression.

LuAnne Roth's chapter looks at the ways that foodways in three popular feature films—*American History X, Along Came Polly,* and *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*—confer a sense of exclusion or belonging, of otherness and self. She asks what happens when we are what we *don't* eat. Using Kristeva's theory of abjection, Roth strongly suggests that food symbolizes the negotiation of gender, culture, race, and family dynamics. Unlike other scholars' ideas about food serving to create *communitas,* food may act as an expression of power.

We believe *Folklore/Cinema* contributes to both film and folklore studies. It provides an awareness not only of popular cinema's indebtedness to traditional forms of human expressive behavior (beliefs, ballads, stories, and other traditional communication) but also of the ways folklore changes because of its mass-mediated variants and dissemination in a variety of situations and cultural contexts in addition to cinema.

Not all the films discussed here are fictional narratives, nor are all the chapters written by academic folklorists. In both of our experiences, when film scholars write about folklore, folklorists find fault with their inadequate use of folkloristics; likewise, when folklorists write about film, film scholars find they do not pay enough attention to the methodologies of film studies. In editing these chapters, we strove to ensure that we represented both their filmic and folkloristic dimensions while also speaking to scholars in other disciplines.

We intend this collection to be provocative: to provoke reactions either in support or rejection of our authors' arguments from both film and folklore scholars. We are asking what happens when we look at popular cinema through the lenses of folklore and folklore studies. What new areas of discourse open to us (as both film scholars and folklorists) when we consider these films folkloristically? And what happens when folklore is presented to us through the filmic? *Folklore/Cinema* asks scholars to propose new ways of addressing the visual and folkloristic and to begin to discuss and analyze the multitude of visual expressions that involve folklore.

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