Through the lens of Folk Horror: Courbet's late landscapes

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Abstract

This paper explores Jean-Désiré-Gustave Courbet's late landscapes using Folk Horror tropes as an interpretational framework. Folk Horror is regarded as a subset of the horror genre and is therefore located within the terrain of contemporary popular culture; a concern with the otherness of the landscape, nature, failed/misguided agency, and rural culture are at its core. An inherent pessimism drives Folk Horror's 'jamming' of normative bucolic representations subverting man's surety of sovereignty over nature, thereby tolling with our current catastrophic failure to address how human agency has affected climate change. Bringing a Folk Horror lens to bear on Courbet's anti-human animism seeks to connect 19th century painting with the ecosocial and cultural concerns of our own time.

Keywords: Folk Horror; Jean-Désiré-Gustave Courbet; Anthropocene; the Anthropocene Unconscious, pessimism; animism; Otherness; landscape; painting; film; speculative realism, ecosocial; pop culture.

We are living in an age where computation and its progeny saturates our lives. Harnessed into proceduralism, it insists on governing the rhythm of our lives, regulating and homogenising experience around consumerism. Even the natural world is co-opted and commodified by this very humanocentric world, where agency is so often reduced to a credit card transaction. However, there are forces at work that still actively demonstrate the fragility and folly of humanity. This is not a new idea, 'hubris' and 'entropy' are elder ideas: the wolf Fenrir is destined to eat the sun. In our time, perhaps as a return of the repressed, narratives of human precarity play out across our screens, providing a pay-per-view reminder that human agency is finite and ultimately futile, perhaps this is no more so than in Folk Horror.

This short paper holds up a Folk Horror lens through which to interpret the late landscapes of Jean-Désiré-Gustave Courbet (1819-1877). I had intended to compare his work with that of Andrew Wyeth, but as I read and found my way into the paintings it became clear that there was more to say about Courbet's iconography, treatment of space, and thematic foci than I had imagined. There is certainly something strange going on in his dark, gloopy 'source' paintings. Courbet is often regarded as influential in impressionism and modernism, yet this paper looks to his plein-air works, considering those in relationship to some of the key characteristics of Folk Horror as articulated in popular cultural texts across media beginning in the late 1960s.

Courbet's work can certainly not be regarded as 'Horror' in any direct way, as might be said of the brutal subjects of Goya's black paintings [*Pinturas negras*]*,* or Zdzisław Beksiński's grim reminders of the fragility of the flesh. As such a closer reading is required to detect the more oblique approach to horror that can be detected within Courbet's late landscapes. As a subgenre of Horror, Folk Horror can be characterised as distinct from 'body horror'; as Adam Scovell writes, 'When tilling in fields of Folk Horror, it becomes apparent that the

work discussed under such an umbrella is not necessarily always 'horror' within any straightforward guise of the term, but simply a mutation of its effect.' (2017: 6) This research paper pivots around focalised interpretation; it is also an interpretation grounded very much in its own time and necessitating paratextual reading back and forth between and across diverse visual and media cultures. The approach taken is therefore hermeneutic as well as informed by the tools and frameworks of Cultural Studies that locate any interpretation as always and intrinsically situational.

Folk Horror (FH from hereon in) is often associated principally with screen-based media or written fiction. There has however been little academic focus on Folk Horror in painting and drawing. This absence means that important visual and thematic precedents that inform the rich tapestry of screen-based Folk Horror (FH) have been neglected. This paper is therefore remedial and, due to length, focuses on Courbet's late landscapes (it is my intention to write a longer paper that extends this out to other artists at some later stage).

What's the Method?

There is no space to spend a good deal of time here writing to address the ways in which interpretive method is contentious; it is certainly couched in the webs of relativity. Using a broadly Cultural Studies approach wreaths the interpretive turn in quotation marks through the cautionary means of locating any viewpoint as situational; a sociologically informed acknowledgement that 'discourse' (multiple discourses) is in play at any socio-cultural and hermeneutic juncture. This paper locates its interpretative gambit in using Folk Horror as a lens onto Courbet's work: it is time-based, epistemological, and mired in what Pierre Bourdieu calls 'taste'. This can therefore be regarded as 'personal', and yet I hope that the paper's oblique angle generates something interesting and relevant to our contemporary concerns and predicaments.

What is Folk Horror?

FH is a term that has found currency as a description of a distinctive branch of the horror genre. Scovell pointed to a set of what he regarded as canonical films each made in the UK that define the terrain, *WitchFinder General* (dir. Michael Reeves, 1968)) , *The Wicker Man* (dir. Robin Hardy, 1973) and *Blood on Satan's Claw* (dir. Piers Haggard, 1971). It is now common to find a host of popular culture media, from TV shows to novels, music to movies, listed under the FH label. What defines this genre? There are a few attributes that sum up the concerns of FH, and while, like any genre, elements can change, there are nonetheless some common features. Although these often work holistically, they can be categorised as visual, atmospheric, and thematic. Key to all these elements is a pervasive sense of pessimism, which is mapped onto the usually more optimistic terrain of the pastoral. In FH landscape is always more than simply setting, instead it regularly becomes character: alive, animated, disregarding human needs, and always distinctly Other. Brian Baker defines FH as 'where the uncanny or horror elements of a narrative are set against pastoral landscapes' (2019: 454). In seeking dominance over nature, it is the turn to agriculture, that produces FH's mythos.

Rites and sacrifice also play pivotal roles, calling on practices that pre-exist 'civilisation' (Walter Burkert suggests that 'civilisation' could be defined as following on from the transition from live sacrifice to symbolic sacrifice, [1986]). These are however framed as futile in most Folk Horrors, following the path forged by *The Wicker Man*. The film borrowed from 19th century (speculative) accounts of agrarian 'folk' religions: JG Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890) foregrounds the myth of the sacrifice of the King to ensure the fertility of the crops provides the basis for a typical Folk Horror plot, while Margaret Murray's claim in *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (1921) that traces of pre-Christian religion were evident in folkloric practices another. This focus on fertility, the natural world and 'pagan rites' has a particular flavour within Folk Horror, often drawing on the counter-culture's critique of repressive tendencies in 1960s/70s. These features, alongside a pessimistic milieu that drains the life-blood out of tragic catharsis and the absence of any hope for humanity are integral to the Othering that is the wellspring of Folk Horror, including the way that the natural world and the pastoral is positioned.

A word about the use of otherness here. Jacques Lacan's usefully distinguishes between the 'big' Other - capitalised and referring to things that are radically different to ourselves and beyond language or categorisation, and the 'little' other - not capitalised and referring to 'other' people, who are also not us (140, 1977). Otherness in both forms is put to work by FH as a means of disturbing norms: it is 'natural' forces that are beyond human control that constitutes the radical (big) Other in FH and this strikes home with recent philosophical critiques of the hubristic dimension of the Anthropocene; all this adds up to the palpable *reality* that the natural world is not designed as the servant of mankind (contra Genesis). FH is not then simply tropage; it stares into the abyss of human precarity pre-empting the pessimism of 'speculative realism' (Nick Land, Graham Harman) and anti-humanist philosophy, where *'homo sapiens* is but an extremely partial mapping of the virtual design space of possible objects of experience.' (Vincent Lê, 2020). I imagine Courbet's laughing – this is Realism.

While FH deploys the iconography of the pastoral, it does so through the frame of disturbance, jamming the codes and conventions – moving therefore beyond the bucolic landscapes of 18th century portraiture or the quiet elegiac qualities of American Tonalism. It is FH's perverse use to the pastoral that I propose provides a useful way of seeing Courbet's work afresh in ways comparable to contemporary pop culture forms.

Courbet's Late Landscapes

Courbet's late landscapes represent a turn away from his figurative work towards what might be thought of as a dematerialisation of discrete form and a turning away from the human world (perhaps to relocate the human world). That's not to say that his focus on representing 'peasant' life and naked women was not totally irrelevant to the FH schema, wherein rural life is represented as different, more focused on nature, to that the urban life, and where sexuality is associated with nature. However, it is the *plein-air* landscapes that call for attention. I propose that they chime with the FH milieu in three distinct ways:

1) *Jamming* the bucolic and picturesque representation of rurality, jamming (as in disrupting the code) sightlines,

2) harnessing the energies of paint as a fluid-based material as an echo of the inherent energies and forces present in the natural world, as an articulation of the *material real*, and,

3) their preoccupation with origins, the transitions from the *formless to form* and what we might call the horrors of the *'abyss'*, which calls into question human agency and significance. Otherness plays out across all of these.

Pastoral Jamming

Courbet's relationship with Romanticism is certainly conflicted, as several critics have noted (Linda Nochlin, John Berger, Michael Fielder & Paul Galvez). There persist in the later work strong links to some of the concepts that underlay Romanticism, particularly the sublime currency of encounters with the natural world. What is *not* present in the late landscapes is the bucolic pastoral: man-made agrarian landscapes, depicting field systems, or tracts of landscaped terrain. The typical picturesque pastoral image is brightly lit in summer sun, with fields of corn promising a winter of plenitude, or wide vistas of sweeping terrains overlooked by their owners. Courbet's not courting favour with such imagery, Nochlin notes, his aesthetic is 'devoid of the small scale, patronizingly picturesque charm…' (1971, 47). Courbet's connections to Romanticism are not however that of Casper David Friedrich's either, with his tendency towards an aerial aesthetic, 'godlike' apparently all-seeing gaze able to apprehend the finest of detail. Courbet's approach is more fluid, tangible, and spontaneous (discussed below), suggesting a more fully sensory, sensual encounter with nature, and, as Galvez has it, 'displacing the civilised mind from the center of [their] universe' (16, 2022). This is of course a central concern of FH.

As well as jamming the pastoral codes, and very specifically, it is the way that Courbet closes off *sightlines* in his paintings that coincides with FH aesthetics. Galvez is also on to this in Courbet's work, writing about 'Stream in a Forest' c.1862, he says 'visual guideposts are largely absent…our gaze hits an impasse at the central point where the stream disappears mysteriously into the landscape' (36, 2022). The foreclosure of arcing vistas is achieved through the almost fleshy unyielding and looming presence of trees and foliage, or in the centralised depictions of caves and grottoes (as in Figs. 1-3, 8-12). We also see such a refusal to the unrestricted agency of the pastoral and romantic gaze in FH films: *The VVitch*, facilitated by a dark treeline [Fig. 4]; in *A Field in England* (dir. Ben Wheatley, 2013) where trees and enclosing boundaries restrict movement [Fig. 6]; and the bony-fingered overhanging branches of winter trees that fracture the field of vision alongside the low-key lighting that pushes backgrounds into misty dissolution in *Blood on Satan's Claw* (dir. Piers Haggard, 1971) [Fig. 5.]. A more recent example of the visual stop is found in the French TV series *Black Spot* [*Zone Blanche*] (2017) [Fig.7]. These compositional tropes are designed to hijack the gaze, to create a sense of claustrophobia and thereby foreclose on a visual (or agentic) mastery over the natural world. While the pastoral is meant to comfort and assure with images of nature under the control of man, something darker and stranger is afoot in Courbet's landscapes that share in a FH sensibility.

Material Real

Courbet was known and critiqued by contemporaries for the way in which paint was used in his later works. Far from controlled, it is scrapped, daubed and scumbled; such verb-based painting embraces the random and the accidental. This form of realism – material realism to coin a phrase - is in the habit of paint; its variable viscosities and opacities is where paint comes to life [See Fig. 2.]. It is not then just representational form that is stake here but also the generative capacity of paint, which is allowed act according to its nature, animated according to its apparent whim, fluid and generational. Courbet's marking making is expressly working towards the random, the detail arrived at by this means rather than directly painted, allowed to behave according to fluid dynamics, much like a sea, river, or stream finding its own physical pathways [Figs. 1, 2,3, 11, 12]. Courbet's application of paint then becomes a *mise-en-abime* (note the meaning, 'placing into the abyss') of the physics-based processes of the natural world. Allowing a process not unlike the generative painting processes of alchemist-magician-painter Ithell Colquhoun, Courbet finds his way to the elemental and the animistic, manifest in paint's hidden energies and nature that are repressed by adepts of control. This also ties into to his proclamation that 'painting is essentially concrete art and can only consist of the presentation of *real and existing things'* (cited Nochlin, 1971, 23 [her italics]). Courbet's *plein-air* work differs from Turner and Corot– it was not worked up in the studio, nor given a story (Nochlin: 138); instead, its immediacy and the animistic qualities of the material stood in testimony to the real (and real-time) of the encounter.

An animistic and anthropomorphic approach to nature is integral to FH, even if 'man-centred' anthropomorphism is shown up as simply humanocentric thinking (magical thinking in Freud's terms). In FH rituals are often the way that the hapless folk seek to control nature, perhaps characterised as a 'god'; however, the paradox of FH is that the genre is often not *of itself* pagan, even if pagan beliefs, myths, and rituals are referenced (tell that to *Wicker Man* fans!). Instead, and as in *The Wicker Man* and David Pinner's novel *Ritual* (1969) on which the film was based, nature is a force in and of itself; it listens to no-one and takes no sacrifice. Courbet's realism treads similar terrain. Man is but nothing to it, thereby nature comes to emblemise the big Other, beyond us and our control. While some examples of FH do come closer to the inclusion of a diegetically 'real' supernatural wherein nature becomes a vengeful force (ie *Black Spot*), in the main anthropmorphisation remains in FH a deluded human affectation. It is possible to see this sensibility in Courbet's landscapes, particularly in *Landscape with Anthropomorphic Rocks* (1873) [Fig. 2] ; this is not an example of magical realism or myth-based painting but is instead framed as a human apprehension of nature, a mirroring seen by man in the shape of man: Courbet 'declared that he could never paint an angel, because he had never seen one' (Nochlin, 1971: 85.) The folk horror[i] of Courbet lies in the clear delineation of nature as beyond us, living, and dynamically producing and dissolving form – like paint left to its own devices, and dancing to its own tune; in other words, radically Other. This is most apparent in his preoccupation of the representing the unrepresentable – that of *the Abyss*.

Origins, the Abyss, Form & Formlessness Courbet's landscapes are often hailed as a strong precursor to Impressionism, and they certainly share the context of painting *plein-air* along with the immediacy required when working in a dynamically shifting weather/light context. Given that many of Courbet's landscapes depict deep and unstructured woodland and water (often water sources), and his adherence to observation and realism, form is

foregrounded – it is not however *just* form in a straightforward sense; instead, it is the *creation* of form that seems to have drawn him to places identified with the source of rivers. Unlike the impressionists, Courbet employs an Ebauche painting process (darks put down first), which allows him to build the darks needed to underscore his preoccupation with the impenetrable abyss. As has been noticed by other critics, Galvaz and Nochlin for eg, there is an easy connection to be made between his paintings of women as the source and at the source [Fig. 3.), exemplified by the famous painting of a woman's genitals ['*Origine du Monde'*, 1866] as well as the river source paintings. The generative 'dark' – as seen with both woods and caves [Figs. 1,8,10] is therefore laden with pregnant meaning and form *in potentia*, an animistic view of nature therefore. Yet it is also not human, nor anthropomorphised, not penetrable or fathomable by the surveying meaning-making eye, a place therefore beyond representation, of no-thing and everything. Christian Perret has also struck by abyssal qualities of Courbet's 'black spots', "At the optical center of many of Courbet's paintings is black; absolute. The nothing of the visible or the whole of matter; an abyss that attracts the eye towards what it will expel: the visible; which attracts the eye expels us from the visible. This black, source and fall, opens or closes in a place that marks the origin and the end of his art." (2017) 'Courbet, beyond the world', [Trans by Chrome(!)] http://www.chperret.net/b_contents_courbet_outreMonde.html

FH's pessimism rolls out of its preoccupation dissolution, the unconscionable and the unspeakable against which man's endeavours and belief in their cosmic centrality diminish to folly. This is the location of formless echoless abyss. In FH neither nature gods, nor indeed any gods, hear any form of scream – existential or sacrificial. We – I begin to own this manhood - are puffed up with illusion, and many of FH's protagonists are paranoid, deluded and mad, see conspiracies and filth all about them. Courbet is not however writing scripts or creating character arcs, I do not claim him for the genre, yet what he seeks to represent in his fathomless 'source' and boundless agitated sea paintings is the othered 'real' of the material world [Figs. 11, 12], a 'real' that exceeds language or even understanding. This makes his work prescient of FH. In paint this is not just a representational affair, but a rejection of the illusion-making used to create three-dimensional form, codes of perspective and the delineation of discrete objects [best exemplified by Fig. 2]. As Galvez notes, Courbet breaks with those received conventions. Instead, there is constant flux, yawning chasms or deep dark foliage, each of which that beguiles and foreclosing sightlines, producing a space that induces claustrophobia and vertigo all at once. In summary, we see in Courbet's late landscapes a folk horror sensibility and identify it not only as another legacy for the genre but also for the nature of our own relationship to the natural world.

3122 words.

Fig. 1. 'The Water Stream', La Brème, 1866. Oil on canvas. 114 x 89 cm Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid.

Curtailed Sightlines

Fig. 2. 'Fantastic Landscape with Anthropomorphic Rocks' 1864. 87 x 93cm (various date/title attributions). Courbet seemed to return to those location on numerous occasions.

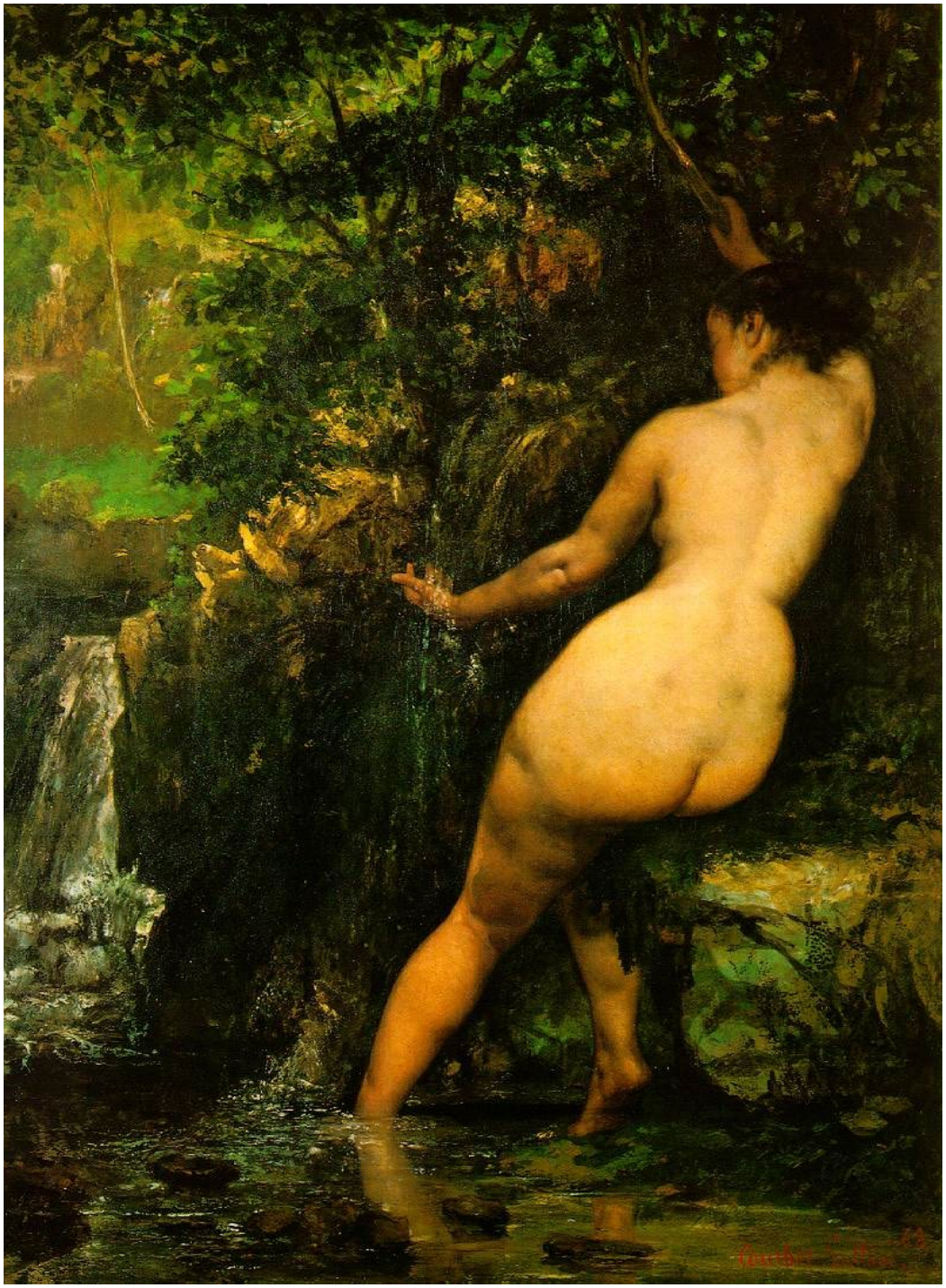

Fig. 3. 'The Source', 1868. 18cm x 97cm. Musee d'Orsay (There is also a similar painting know as 'The Bather at the Source', 1862, 120cm x 74.3 Oil on canvas).

Fig. 4. Screenshot of the settlement in *The VVitch*. Curtailing the gaze – trees as impenetrable barrier and smoking out clarity.

Fig. 5. Screenshot. *Blood on Satan's Claw* Vista jamming. Muted palette, fingers of obscuring mist, cold colours, the soil that swallows us all. Branches – bony fingers breaking up sightlines of pastoral unity.

Fig. 6. Screenshot. *A Field in England*. The Pastoral turned upside down. Enclosed by trees and hedgerows.

Fig. 7. Screenshot from the opening sequence of TV show, *Black Spot* (visual foreclosure).

Fig. 8. ‘Grotto of Sarrazine near Nans-sous-Sainte-Anne’, c. 1875

Fig. 9. ‘Stream in the Jura Mountains‘ (*The Torrent*), 1872–73, Honolulu Museum of Art

Fig. 10. Gustave Courbet, 'The Source of the Loue', 1864. Oil on canvas, 99.7 x 142.2 cm (39 1/4 x 56 in.). New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
Photo: © The Metropolitan Museum of Art / Art Resource, New York

Fig. 11. ‘The Wave’. c1871-73 Oil on canvas

Fig. 12. *'Stormy Sea'*, c. 1869, oil on canvas, 15 ½ x 22 ⅜ in. Portland Art Museum

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[i] I distinguish between folk horror and Folk Horror here, as a way to connect Courbet’s work to the genre of Folk Horror, but at the same time to acknowledge that his work is part of a time-located intertextually dependent, convention lead genre.