



RAWHEAD REX

CAST

David Dukes as Howard Hallenbeck
Kelly Piper as Elaine Hallenbeck
Niall Tóibín as Reverend Coot
Ronan Wilmot as Declan O'Brien
Niall O'Brien as Det. Insp. Isaac Gissing
Hugh O'Connor as Robbie Hallenbeck
Cora Lunny as Minty Hallenbeck
Heinrich von Schellendorf as Rawhead Rex

CREW

Directed by **George Pavlou**
Produced by **Kevin Attew** and **Don Hawkins**
Screenplay by **Clive Barker**
Music Composed and Orchestrated by **Colin Towns**
Art Direction by **Len Huntingford**
Creature Effects by **Peter Litten**
Director of Photography **John Metcalfe**





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I DON'T BELIEVE IN THE DEVIL: 'RAWHEAD REX' – A FOLK HORROR?

by Kat Ellinger

There's been a lot of discussion in recent years over what exactly constitutes folk horror in terms of its place as a subgenre of horror cinema. Despite this, a firm definition remains evasive. Piers Haggard defined his own feature *Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971) as such in an interview with *Fangoria* in 2004. Some years later, in 2010, British actor and presenter Mark Gatiss applied the label to three films – Haggard's aforementioned picture, *Witchfinder General* (1968) and *The Wicker Man* (1973) – in his BBC television series *A History of Horror*. Since then, as the idea of folk horror has fallen into popular use, debate has raged on, the result of which has been that more and more films have been identified as displaying aspects of the genre – both within and outside of horror cinema – as well as music, television, literature, art, and culture, while the playing field continues to widen and constantly evolve.

What makes folk horror so difficult to grasp in any concrete form is its status as an umbrella term that can encompass a wide range of creative material from various countries, periods, and styles. However, if we take Haggard's film as a good example of the formula, and apply the definition rigidly, then technically folk horror would only cover period films that involve rural locations, and elements of witchcraft or the occult. And while some of this is applicable to a number of films that fall into the category, the genre has proven to be far more fluid than that. For example, one of the most definitive folk horror features ever made, *The Wicker Man* (1973), is testament to the fact that matters can move away from classical settings and still retain enough substance to fall into the category. Other films prove harder to classify. But, to give a simple definition for argument's sake, what we can agree on is that location is key in the folk horror: rural. Adding to this, some aspect of folklore, superstition, paganism, witchcraft or traditional ritual practice must also be present. And if this is the case, then couldn't *Rawhead Rex* be labelled every bit as much a folk horror as *Blood on Satan's Claw*?



At first glance *Rawhead Rex*, especially with its connection to the splatterpunk literary genre, is a million miles away from the twee ritualistic practices witnessed in *Blood on Satan's Claw* or *The Wicker Man*. In the case of both the book and the film, Clive Barker's association with the post-punk generation of writers trading in hyper-violent prose made the text ripe for adaptation for an audience of Video Nasty-era kids hungry for blood and gore, and tired of slasher films. On the surface the film does fit into this era perfectly. Its fast pacing, tongue-in-cheek humour, low budget, anarchistic energy and other depraved elements – such as diabolical baptism by golden shower – align it with other films of the era like *The Evil Dead* (1981), *Bad Taste* (1987), *Return of the Living Dead* (1985), and also a handful of innovative slashers which mined the occult vein; for example *Superstition* (1982) and *Evilspeak* (1981). The genre's fascination with the occult had fallen into vogue by the late eighties/early nineties, placing *Rawhead Rex* as genre cousins with other like-minded films such as *Demons* (1985), Michele Soavi's *The Church* (1989) and *The Sect* (1991), and even far out titles like *Death Spa* (1989). Ironically, the opening scene of *Rawhead Rex*, which begins with farmers awakening the beast, an ancient pagan God named Rawhead, in a misty field, by removing the sacred stone he is buried under, has far more in common with *Blood on Satan's Claw* – where Satan's Claw is literally unearthed as a field is ploughed – than it does with any of the aforementioned contemporary films. And the similarity doesn't end there.

Where *Rawhead Rex* connects most prominently to *Blood on Satan's Claw* is through the angle of community possession. In Piers Haggard's feature, following the accidental digging up of a claw from the earth, the Devil must first take possession of a series of locals in order to fully manifest. The entity does this initially through a young girl, Angel Blake (Linda Hayden), who goes on to recruit more of the village's young people for her master, drawing them into her wicked cult. Once inside, the cult members are encouraged to delve into the taboo and their behaviour becomes increasingly more sexualised and violent. The film is notable for its themes of rape and murderous teenagers. Rawhead, by contrast, appears fully fleshed out and able to cause carnage from the offset – in both Barker's original short story and George Pavlou's film – yet he does still need to feed in order to gain strength. He does this by killing, and then eating, any human who crosses his path, even children – and in doing so Barker dips into one of the ultimate taboos of child murder, which even by horror

film standards is often a delicate subject. Rawhead, just like the Devil in *Blood on Satan's Claw*, is able to possess and manipulate anyone of his choosing. He initially selects Declan O'Brien (Ronan Wilmot) to do his bidding, who quickly becomes a crazed lunatic willing to commit depraved acts, and to even accept death, if Rawhead demands it. Following this, the demon also gains control of the local police inspector, who, in a moment of madness, driven by his possessed state, is able to take out half of the local law enforcement by dowsing their vehicles in petrol and setting them alight. One must assume that if Rawhead had been able to continue in his quest, more brainwashed minions would have followed. While this part of Rawhead's story is never really allowed to develop, and one can only speculate how his plan would have evolved, it is safe to assume that in order to fully reinstate himself as a god he would need followers and therefore possession would have become more widespread, as it is in Haggard's film. The plot also comes with a suggestion of ancient ritual sacrifice and pagan rites, which again links the film to Haggard's previously mentioned forerunner on some level.

Rawhead Rex differs from its predecessors by the fact that it channels aspects of paganism in a way that is so unlike anything else in the folk horror canon. Pagan elements often appear in horror film to represent the complete (evil) opposite to the (good) forces of the Christian church. Therefore, in forerunners like *The Wicker Man*, the story involves a pious God-fearing cop who travels to an island inhabited by a pagan cult in order to find a missing girl. Although the film delivers an unconventional ending, it still makes it clear that no matter how confused or misguided the central protagonist is, he is on the side of good, whereas his nemesis Lord Summerisle (Christopher Lee) and his clan have completely lost the plot and become deviant and dangerous as a result. *Rawhead Rex* completely rejects the line that the Church can offer salvation – although admittedly it doesn't provide much for *The Wicker Man*'s Sergeant Howie either. However, quite unlike many other horror films that trade in the idea of actual devils, demons or supernatural entities, the church is virtually powerless against Rawhead; although the secret to his ultimate destruction lies within its altar, it doesn't originate from any Biblical foundation. The demon's immunity to the power of the Church is demonstrated by the fact that crosses and other Christian ephemera have no effect on him. He is able to walk inside the church and destroy its contents in defiance. The only way to kill him is through another pagan power source: that





of the Mother Goddess. In this, Barker does something quite transgressive, because this power can only be wielded by a woman. It is a grieving mother who is able to stop him, when the Goddess statue, with its pendulous breasts and ripe pregnant womb, falls into her hands. The weapon holds no power for a man.

It is often the case that pagan women are portrayed as witches in horror film, and with that the usual negative stereotypes and connotations are employed. There are very few films pre-nineties which feature the idea of white witches or good paganism fighting the forces of evil. It is usually the patriarchal power of the Church that has to step in to restore order when diabolical entities threaten everyday life. Yet, in a direct contrast to this line of thinking, even though Rawhead is not defeated by a witch specifically, it is implied by the use of a Mother Goddess statue that good pagan powers are evoked in order to defeat him.

Of course, as with all folk horrors, setting is key and *Rawhead Rex* certainly delivers on the rural location element. The film moves Barker's initial setting of a village just outside London (as seen in the book) to Ireland, with George Pavlou shooting the entire feature in the picturesque setting of County Wicklow, which gives the added bonus of grounding the film in a place with a strong Celtic pagan tradition. This aspect works well with the central elements in the plot where Rawhead is apparently an ancient deity or king with supernatural powers. Starting with the sacred stone, the director layers misty woods and fields, scarecrows, and isolated churches with devilish stained-glass windows to conjure up a folk horror feel that defies the film's usual association with the slasher/monster movie. The book also features further pagan references to the Harvest Moon and Harvest Festival, but these are left hanging between the lines when it comes to the film version.

While Pavlou's film strays wildly in some parts from Barker's original short story – published in the third volume of his *Books of Blood* – it does keep enough of the central elements, as well as its connection to folklore, to place it in the folk horror camp. The origins of the titular beast from Barker's story can be traced back not to a pagan entity, like we see in the film and the book, but to a mythical bogeyman, Rawhead-and-Bloody-Bones, which was a story told to children to keep them in their beds at night. In this respect, Rawhead is a child killer, something Barker capitalises on in the book by stating, several times, the creature's love for

child meat, while in the film he makes tasty morsels of the younger cast members. Folklore and pagan myth are full of child killers such as these: Lilith, sometimes thought of as the Biblical Adam's first wife, was often depicted in Jewish myth as a succubus who sucked the marrow from newborn babies. Likewise, in Greek myth, Lamia followed a similar path to Lilith in her penchant for eating children. Similarly, the pagan God Moloch demanded children as sacrifice. Barker also makes reference in his text, specifically, to the Wild Beast of the Woods, bringing in an association with legends of "wild men" throughout European folklore and mythology. In this instance men are turned feral and beastlike, left to lurk in haunted woods, their bodies covered in fur, or hair. In the legend's most extreme form we see figures such as the Yeti or Sasquatch emerge. There is also Krampus to consider, another manlike beast who eats children. There is also a reference to the Tall Man – the name given to the local inn in the film – a name which is derived from a series of European folktales, mainly originating from Russia and Romania, and other parts of Eastern Europe, which went on to inspire the Slender Man urban legend that has become popular today through the internet as examples of so-called "creepypasta". And all of this feeds into Barker's idea of "Rawhead", making him so much more than just another movie monster, but something rooted in a strong folklore tradition.

A large proportion of Clive Barker's work relates to myth, yet *Rawhead Rex* stands out as something a little different. Like a modern day H.P. Lovecraft the writer has conjured rich mythologies, even entire worlds, in many of his iconic texts which include *The Damnation Game*, *Weaveworld*, *Cabal*, *The Hellbound Heart*, *Imajica*, *The Great and Secret Show* and *Coldheart Canyon*, and many of these places are drawn completely from his own dark imagination. With *Rawhead Rex* the writer borrows from an established traditional tale, albeit one that has faded over the years. Rawhead-and-Bloody-Bones was strictly an oral tradition, and while mentions of the myth can be found on both sides of the Atlantic, the memory of that particular beast has been all but forgotten in favour of a more widespread idea of "The Boogeyman". However, in *Rawhead Rex*, at least a part of him lives on.

Kat Ellinger is an author, editor in chief of Diabolique magazine, and co-host of the Daughters of Darkness and Hell's Belles podcasts. Her writing on film has been published, both online and in print, by Fangoria, Scream magazine, Shock Till You Drop, Senses of Cinema and BFI.







ABOUT THE TRANSFER

Rawhead Rex is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1.85:1 with stereo 2.0 and 5.1 audio. The original 35mm negative was scanned in 4K with Dice software on an Arriscan. Colour grading was performed on a DaVinci Resolve and picture restoration was completed using Phoenix Finish. All restoration work was carried out by OCN Digital Labs, CT. The audio was remastered by Kino Lorber from the original magnetic tracks.

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and Booklet Produced by **Ewan Cant**
Executive Producers **Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni**
Technical Producer **James White**
QC Manager **Nora Mehenni**
Blu-ray Mastering **David Mackenzie**
Artist **Wes Benscoter**
Design **Obviously Creative**

SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agran, Benedict Jewer, Cora Venus Lunny, Hugh O'Connor, George Pavlou,
Marcus Campbell Sinclair, Kjetil Muri Skarstein and Colin Towns.



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