

(G)hosting Television: *Ghostwatch* and its medium

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Abstract

This article's subject is *Ghostwatch* (BBC, 1992), a drama broadcast on Halloween night of 1992 which adopted the rhetoric of live non-fiction programming, and attracted controversy and ultimately censure from the Broadcasting Standards Council. In what follows, we argue that *Ghostwatch* must be understood as a televisually-specific artwork and artefact. We discuss the programme's ludic relationship with some key features of television during what Ellis (2000) has termed its era of 'availability', principally liveness, mass simultaneous viewing, and the flow of the television super-text. We trace the programme's television-specific historicity whilst acknowledging its allusions and debts to other media (most notably film and radio). We explore the sophisticated ways in which *Ghostwatch*'s visual grammar and vocabulary and deployment of 'broadcast talk' (Scannell 1991) variously ape, comment upon and subvert the rhetoric of factual programming, and the ends to which these strategies are put. We hope that these arguments collectively demonstrate the aesthetic and historical significance of *Ghostwatch* and identify its relationship to its medium and that medium's history. We offer the programme as an historically-reflexive artefact, and as an exemplary instance of the work of art in television's age of broadcasting, liveness and co-presence.

Keywords: *Ghostwatch*, television, liveness, flow, drama-documentary, horror, BBC, broadcasting, direct address, television presenters.

Introduction

The notion that a given medium of expression and/or communication possesses certain defining and determining characteristics - that is, the notion of medium-specificity - is one that has been subject to a series of extensive elaborations and refutations across the histories of Film and Television Studies (and, of course, elsewhere). It might seem especially foolhardy to make claims for the medium-specificity of television in a supposedly 'post-television' age (Spigel and Olsson 2004) characterised by 'convergence culture' (Jenkins 2008). However, turning this perspective on its head might suggest that whilst television does not possess an unchanging essence across time and national boundaries, it *is* specific things at specific points in its history, and within specific (often, national) contexts of production and reception.

In what follows, our overall argument will be that the one-off BBC drama *Ghostwatch*, broadcast for the first and only time on Halloween night of 1992, must be understood as a televisually-specific artwork and artefact. As part of this argument, we will also give due consideration to *Ghostwatch*'s links to other media in its content, reception and afterlife. In some ways, this specificity is very specific to some of the features of terrestrial UK broadcast television circa 1992. In others, it is more general, whilst remaining contingent upon and characterised by the history of the medium.

Ghostwatch, a pre-recorded drama, imitates the form of a live factual television programme; more specifically, the kind of fast-moving, heavily-segmented and somewhat melodramatic programming typified (at the time) by

Crimewatch (BBC, 1984- [originally *Crimewatch UK*]). It 'starred' several presenters familiar from BBC programmes: Michael Parkinson, Sarah Greene, and Mike Smith. Smith and Greene were associated with television entertainment, specifically with family and children's programming. Parkinson was synonymous with BBC journalism as well as light entertainment. Significantly, *Ghostwatch*'s main presenters were known for appearing in live television broadcasts. From the studio, Parkinson and Smith interview parapsychology 'experts' and take calls from viewers; while Greene, along with comedian Craig Charles, reports from Foxhill Drive, Northolt (London), reputedly the most haunted place in Britain.

The drama centres on the home of Pamela Early and her two young daughters. In the early stages of the programme, we are shown footage of previous possible paranormal activity involving the house and, in particular, the two children. As the programme progresses, the history of the house and the origins of the paedophilic poltergeist, 'Pipes', who haunts it are gradually revealed, and a series of horrific events befall the Early family, the outside broadcast unit, and eventually even the personnel in the BBC studio.

The BBC received a significant number of complaints following the programme's broadcast, and was ultimately censured by the Broadcasting Standards Council. The complaints and censure revolved around three main perceived features of *Ghostwatch* - the programme's adoption (or perhaps 'hijacking') of the rhetoric of factuality, the lack of clarity regarding its fictional status due to the equivocations of some paratextual material and to the possibility

of 'stumbling upon' broadcast texts (often after they have begun), and the subversion of the BBC's reputation for reliable, trustworthy programming and paternalism - which together led to some viewers being misled (or at least, experiencing uncertainty which they did not enjoy).

These brief descriptions of the programme's content, context and reception already begin to point to some medium-specific issues that will be developed further below. Our argument is structured in three main sections. In the first, we discuss the programme's ludic relationship with some key features of television during what Ellis (2000) has termed its era of 'availability', principally liveness, mass simultaneous viewing, and the flow of the television super-text. In the second, we trace the programme's television-specific historicity whilst acknowledging its allusions and debts to other media (most notably film and radio). The third section explores the sophisticated ways in which *Ghostwatch*'s visual grammar and vocabulary and deployment of 'broadcast talk' (Scannell 1991) variously ape, comment upon and subvert the rhetoric of factual programming, and the ends to which these strategies are put. Collectively, we hope that these arguments demonstrate the aesthetic and historical significance of *Ghostwatch* and identify its relationship to its medium and that medium's history.

Ghostwatch and medium-specificity

The notion that broadcast TV is live still haunts the medium. (Ellis 1992: 132)

We are arguing that *Ghostwatch* is televisually-specific and deploys certain possibilities of the medium intelligently. However, we would not wish to be misinterpreted as making essentialist claims or naively subscribing to a false and outdated ontology. Critiques of the idea that liveness defines television go back at least as far as Jane Feuer's seminal 'The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology' (1983). Television historians have attacked the notion of 'liveness' as 'the medium's defining characteristic'. Martin McLoone remarks that the monopoly of live transmission had ended in broadcast television by the late 1950s becoming instead an 'element in a varied schedule' (1996: 86). Writing from a theoretical perspective, John Thornton Caldwell and Mimi White have launched strongly-worded attacks upon what Caldwell terms 'The ideology of liveness myth' (1995: 27). White asserts that: 'just because television *can* be live does not mean it is always seen through this lens...one might just as well say that because television *can* be taped, there is always a residual impression that all television transmission is previously recorded' (2004: 81-2).

Recent scholarship committed to the importance of the phenomenology, if not ontology, of liveness in television implicitly anticipate White's rhetorical manoeuvre. Speaking of 'previously recorded' television, John Ellis observes that 'Transmission is live, even when the programmes are not' (2000: 31). Jérôme Bourdon makes the further point that 'watching television "live", even though one is dealing with the broadcasting of recorded programmes, offers a guarantee that, at any given time, the flow can be interrupted by a newsflash' (2000: 552).

Stephanie Marriott proposes to decouple liveness from ontology by calling upon the useful notion of a 'communicative affordance' (2007: 13). This seeks to capture the idea that a certain object - a technology, perhaps - will be better suited to some uses than others, without going so far as to fully determine the uses to which it is put. Marriott further suggests that the uses to which an object is put depend greatly on 'the history of its contexts of appropriation' (ibid). 'Liveness' is not an (still less *the*) ontological given of the television medium. However, it *is* one of its key communicative affordances, *and* an important element of broadcast history to date.

Charles Barr *does* seek to maintain that what distinguishes television ontologically (from cinema) is its ability to transmit live images but his argument focuses upon the way this ability has been used and exploited *historically* (1996: 53). Barr claims that when videotape and film recording processes became widespread in television they were used towards simulating live relay, producing 'delayed-action live transmission' (Ibid.: 55) and 'filmed record of a live programme' (Ibid.: 63). While we should resist overstating the ontological significance of 'liveness' to television, we can certainly call live-like effects televisually-specific in relation to their prominence throughout the history of the medium. Since pre-recorded programming can also foster the illusion of live transmission, it is not as simple as saying, as McLoone does, that liveness stops characterising TV as soon as live transmission goes into decline.

White's point that television is populated by live and recorded material that is not always categorisable as one or the other by the viewer is of particular

significance to *Ghostwatch*. If liveness were indeed an ontological given and compulsory feature of television, as it was for a brief time in the early years of television broadcasting, there would not be the room for the *play* seen in *Ghostwatch*. Liveness is not a given of television, but a complex possibility that permits several permutations. It ranges from live reporting on a catastrophe as it unfolds, to a live but pre-scripted and extensively rehearsed performance of a drama by actors. It encompasses pre-recorded and edited sitcom or soap opera received by viewers simultaneously at the time transmitted by its broadcaster.

Ghostwatch cleverly navigates and finds its place within these possibilities. It is a pre-recorded programme purporting to be a live one. Although the drama was shot 'as live' on videotape in a studio, this was an aesthetic choice to fabricate the appearance of an investigative programme being broadcast live. As reported in the 2012 documentary *Ghostwatch: Behind the Curtains*, the decision to shoot on videotape broke with the contemporaneous conventions of both the BBC Drama Department and *Screen One* (BBC, 1985-2002) strand to shoot its dramas on film and was vigorously fought against by the BBC, including executive producer Richard Broke. As such, *Ghostwatch* subverted and challenged expectations surrounding liveness and pre-recorded drama within the institutional culture of BBC1. Within the diegesis of the 'live special' pre-recorded footage and live transmission are intermixed as the studio and outside broadcasts alternate with various 'VT' segments and onscreen TV monitors showing recorded materials. A self-reflexive example of the complex possibilities of liveness occurs in the programme's final ten minutes. Dr. Lin Pascoe (Gillian Bevan), having noticed something about the 'feed' from Foxhill Drive, suddenly

rises from her chair. The camera operator, wrong-footed, pans briefly rightwards towards Michael Parkinson before clumsily lurching leftward and zooming in slightly (losing focus in the process) to recapture Pascoe in her new position in front of the studio screen bank. She has discovered that ‘this picture we’re seeing now isn’t live’ but a repeat transmission of an earlier part of the feed. The notion that television can falsely claim to be live is explored here through a pre-recorded drama’s impeccable fabrications of live camera operating errors as well as the concept of archive footage being mis-advertised as a live feed.

Ghostwatch does not just explore the modal tensions of television liveness in the ontological abstract but also in context. The visual composition and design of the show took account of developments in television viewing technology that further muddied the waters in regards to live and taped television. The mass availability of VHS recorders in Britain in 1992 made it possible to view both a recorded version of a live TV transmission after broadcast and to move and stop relay within the recording. This added layer of timeshifting is acknowledged with elaborately detailed mocked-up press clippings created to withstand the scrutiny that freeze-frame technology permitted (as discussed by Lesley Manning on the DVD extra ‘Shooting Reality’, *Ghostwatch* DVD, BFI, 2002), and fleeting, uncertain glimpses of Pipes which reward the ability to pause and replay footage.

According to Bourdon (2000: 534-5), for a programme to qualify for ‘maximum liveness’, we must be ‘watching at the same time as the event, at the same time as everyone else, [...] with an event taking place in different locations connected by television’. The sense of liveness, therefore, is shored up by

coordination of and communication between various ‘simultaneous elsewheres’ (Marriott 2007: 102). Here we encounter another set of possibilities of the medium played upon by *Ghostwatch*: the potential for large segments of the population to be watching the same broadcast of a television programme at the same time. As scholars such as John Ellis have pointed out, the ‘sense of togetherness in separation’ (2000: 32) generated by simultaneous national viewing is most relevant to broadcast television prior to the advent of multichannel satellite, cable and digital services and timeshifting video and digital technologies, in what he terms ‘the era of scarcity’ (Ibid.: 39). While broadly agreeing that ‘co-presence’ is best described as characteristic of an historical moment in the medium, we would argue, however, that the characteristics of UK television broadcasting in 1992 still had at least one foot in ‘the era of scarcity’ and that therefore ‘co-presence’ remains a relevant concept in this period. Despite national take-up of satellite television and home VHS recording in Britain in 1992, the majority of households still only had access to four terrestrial channels and predominantly watched TV on transmission. Even if it *were* a somewhat anachronistic concept at the time of broadcast, *Ghostwatch* is identifying with and emphasising the ongoing potential for television to be received simultaneously.

As Ellis observes, direct address is one of the key ingredients in television’s ‘rhetoric of liveness’ and is employed in the creation of an impression (sometimes an illusion) of simultaneity and co-presence: ‘[Presenters] talk of “now” and “today”, “here” and “we” [...] in order to orient themselves as speaking in the same moment of time as their audience hears them’ (2000: 33). These ‘speech indicators’ are present throughout *Ghostwatch*, but take for example Parkinson’s

first words after the programme's credits sequence (emphases added): 'So, welcome *live this Halloween night* to the first ever TV 'Ghostwatch.' That's the scene in Foxhill Drive in Northolt. Our outside broadcast units are there; that's the house where it might all happen *tonight*, or it might not - *we shall see.*'

Assumptions about the nationally conjoined and synchronised way that TV is received are also played out in dramatic (and fantastic) terms in *Ghostwatch*. In the final ten minutes, Pascoe announces 'we've created a mass-séance' with the interconnected transmission of the broadcast to homes across the country opening a pathway for poltergeist Pipes to intrude domestically throughout the nation. A fictional device used throughout the drama is a switchboard answering service with viewers phoning in stories of paranormal activity or information about the history of Foxhill Drive, which are collated and recited throughout the programme until they demonstrate simultaneous patterns of paranormal activity nationally. The sense of audiences doing and watching the same thing at the same time is reinforced as Mike Smith reports that callers' descriptions of the unverified image of Pipes in the broadcast university research video 'all tally'. This was also a genuinely 'co-present' element of *Ghostwatch* as broadcast on 31 October 1992. The fictional switchboard co-existed with an actual BBC hotline linked together by an onscreen phone number which was part of the diegesis but could also be called by viewers. On the night of the broadcast, the line was staffed by members of the Psychic Research Society, while the staff of the BBC's general telephone line had also been briefed to reassure anxious viewers who might call in. But the programme makers underestimated the volume of calls that would be received, and on the night of the broadcast, the BBC's switchboards were jammed; a

statistic that has been quoted in several places suggests that at one point twenty thousand callers were trying to get through - issues subsequently discussed by producer Ruth Baumgarten and Richard Broke on the BBC's right-to-reply programme *BiteBack* (15 November 1992) and in the 2002 documentary *Ghostwatch: Behind the Curtains*.

As the above discussion of co-presence illustrates, we see *Ghostwatch* as referring intra-textually to, and exemplifying through reception, the way television programmes are watched. Another conceptualisation of how television is viewed that is illuminating in this context is that of 'flow', pioneered by Raymond Williams (1974), whereby television is organised as a planned sequence rather than discrete programmes, and interstitial materials (such as continuity and advertising) become key textual elements. We could add to this Nick Browne's (1984) related notion of the 'supertext' where programming and interstitial material are inextricably bound together and television can only be understood cumulatively. Flow and its variations are becoming endangered species of television ontology given the contemporary ability to watch TV outside broadcast schedules through internet downloading, DVD platforms and digital services and the above historical disclaimers apply once again. However, much about the way *Ghostwatch* was produced, broadcast and received depends on an understanding of the programme as part of a continuous transmission.

Ghostwatch plays upon the fact that the programme is part of a planned broadcast flow. During the introduction Parkinson informs the viewers that 'we'll be here with updates roughly every hour throughout the night'. Just over an hour

in he reports that the 'live' broadcast will cut in to the programme scheduled to follow on BBC One: 'I should tell you if you've joined to see the next programme that in fact we're staying with what we have here at Foxhill Drive'. This maintains the feeling of continuous broadcast whilst locating *Ghostwatch* within an evening of scheduled transmission.

The placing of *Ghostwatch* within the *actual* flow of BBC One's schedule on Halloween 1992 could have shaped the interpretive activity of viewers. The programme's plausibility as factual television comes not simply from an intra-diegetic facsimile of BBC formats but also by running on from informational programmes *The Nine O'Clock News* (BBC, 1970-2000) and *BBC Weather* (BBC, 1936-). In fact, audience complainants on *BiteBack* tended to target accusations towards misdirection of the viewer by the interstitial material rather than the programme.

In interview, writer Stephen Volk suggests the lingering sense of menace left by *Ghostwatch*'s ambiguous ending could have been alleviated and much of the subsequent public outrage at BBC fakery placated by a reassuring explanatory continuity announcement immediately following the programme (Evans 2012: 10). Repeat viewing of the post-broadcast interstitials confirms that anxiety is prolonged by an ident of BBC2 horror movie strand *The Vault of Terror* (BBC, 1992-1994) featuring a prosthetic demon face and an audibly gasping, nervously laughing continuity announcer who fails to clarify what had just been broadcast. Viewing BBC One on a regular basis underpinned audience practices in relation to *Ghostwatch*. As David Buckingham observes, audience assumptions that

Ghostwatch was targeted at younger viewers stem from the programme being ‘trailed in the early evening’ and featuring presenters familiar from BBC children’s television (1996: 246). In this formulation, the process of viewing television as an ongoing daily text and understanding programmes cumulatively through previous ones shown on the same channel becomes accountable for what audiences make of a particular text as much as the content of that text.

Another possibility of continuity-based, rather than selective, television viewing is that audiences will tune into a programme once already underway thus missing the interstitial and/or paratextual material that helps to contextualise the programme. *Ghostwatch*’s 9.25pm start time came in-between programming on other terrestrial channels, increasing the likelihood of viewers missing the introductory *Screen One* ident and author and star title cards which categorise it as a drama:

First card: ‘MICHAEL PARKINSON in’

Second card: ‘with SARAH GREENE / MIKE SMITH / CRAIG
CHARLES / by STEPHEN VOLK

Viewers who were aware of *Screen One* as a strand of drama programming may have concluded immediately that the programme was fictional. But by virtue of the minimal information they offer and the brevity of their appearance, the title cards do not completely give the game away. Interstitial material is similarly unforthright about the programme’s reality status. The elegantly equivocal

opening continuity announcement declares *Ghostwatch* a ‘*Screen One*...film’ but also an ‘outside broadcast’ with named non-fiction TV presenters where distinctions between ‘fact and fiction’ are unclear. Once ‘inside’ the programme, there is no (dramatic) framing material and, arguably, nothing in the tone of the programme tips the hand.

Ghostwatch and television history

A compelling argument could be made that *Ghostwatch* lacks televisual-specificity as an historical object. The programme is rife with homages to American film horror. For example, the figure of a possessed teenage girl ventriloquizing a gravelly masculine adult voice is liberally borrowed from *The Exorcist* (1973). Both *Sight & Sound* (Newman 1993: 55) and Channel 4’s compilation *100 Greatest Scary Moments* (2003) archive the programme amongst other film releases.

The heritage of *Ghostwatch* also tends to become conflated with the general history of broadcasting, rather than that of television in particular. Cultural commentary on *Ghostwatch* often relates its impact to a broadcast media legacy of influencing public belief. For example, the programme is usually identified as the broadcast successor of the infamous Orson Welles radio play *War of the Worlds* (CBS, 1938) rather than a previous *television* drama-documentary (see Brown 2010 and *Ghost in the Machine* BBC 2009). Furthermore, the ‘in-built trust of the BBC brand’ (Volk in Evans 2012: 9) that the programme plays upon in faking a live factual broadcast refers to a ‘reputation for reliable, objective broadcasting’

(Robertson 2008: 465) that the corporation established in radio during the Second World War prior to national dissemination of television.

It is possible to trace the effect of *Ghostwatch* to the origins of electronic communications. Jeffrey Sconce argues that from inception electronic media have been associated with paranormal communication and that television inherits these links. While radio and telegraphy are haunted by disembodied speech, the liveness, simultaneity and co-presence of television viewing contains ‘the disturbing thought that, just as we can potentially peer into other worlds through the television, these other worlds may be peering back into our own living room’ (2000: 144). *Ghostwatch* cultivates the paranormal by dramatically simulating and extra-textually provoking simultaneity and co-presence. Do we *need* televisual paradigms in order to historicise *Ghostwatch*?

We answer strongly in the affirmative. *Ghostwatch* self-consciously engages with television history as its genre, form and address plays upon a lineage of horror and drama-documentary television, acknowledging how they have been explored and represented by television rather than literature or cinema. This is not to say that horror fiction or drama-documentary fusions are absent from literature and cinema (far from it), but that *Ghostwatch*’s deployment of these forms relate most clearly to television’s peculiar variations. The programme also draws on the history of the BBC as a broadcasting institution. The self-referential and discursive forms of delivery suggest that *Ghostwatch* does not simply document television history but also comments on and teaches about it. Volk recalls that *Ghostwatch* was intended as ‘TV that was the equivalent in literature of a ghost

story' (Volk in Brown 2010: 68). However, the 'ghost story' is also an historically dominant sub-category of television horror which Helen Wheatley contends 'initiated Gothic drama on British television' (2006: 26), suggesting a (nationally) televisually-specific interaction with the intermedial tradition of horror. Wheatley also argues that one of the qualities of 'terror/horror television' that has traditionally distinguished it from the 'gothic' in other art forms is 'simultaneous reference to its domestic reception context, in order to produce its lucid sense of the uncanny' (Ibid.: 7). According to Wheatley, 'we are constantly reminded...this takes place, and is *viewed*, within a domestic milieu' (ibid, original emphasis). Much television horror therefore depends on an assumption of domestic reception for affect.

Ghostwatch reminds the viewer of its 'simultaneous' domesticity by constructing a plausible and familiar *mise-en-scène* of contemporaneous British domestic and family life forging synonymy between the onscreen settings and those of reception. Materially in the Early family home in Foxhill Drive and anecdotally in audio and/or verbal reports from the nation's homes we recognise features of the family home such as: children's drawings, pets, family bickering, plumbing problems, schoolbooks and animal ornaments. Other features linked to fashion, culture and technology (teen pop posters, microwave ovens) place the domestic in a contemporaneous milieu. These signifiers of domestic security are then systematically made strange and perverted: cats eat through a corpse, drawings and schoolbooks feature 'disgusting' sketches by and of a poltergeist, erratic plumbing signals the domestic invasion of 'Pipes', ornaments break apart and fly across the room, and teenage angst strengthens the ghost. The 'uncanny'

project of transforming home comforts into alienating threats was held culpable by audiences and critics for disturbing viewers. For example, newspapers reported that the father of Martin Denham, a teenage boy who committed suicide reportedly after becoming obsessed with the programme, partly attributed his son's 'hypnotised' state to *Ghostwatch*'s plausible depiction of domestic central heating problems which resembled those in the family home (Graves 1992).

As we discuss further below, direct address is a prominent feature of television non-fiction, but *Ghostwatch* locates its use of 'direct address' within a tradition of telefantasy anthologies as well as factual television. Television anthology drama, a form which has traditionally been a delivery mechanism for horror and science-fiction storytelling, often begins with a 'host' directly addressing the camera (and audience) to introduce that week's play. In the US telefantasy anthology portmanteau *Night Gallery* (NBC, 1969-1973) each story was introduced from a mock gothic art gallery by producer-host Rod Serling facing the camera directly while dressed formally in suit and tie and standing in an official-looking pose with hands clasped across the waist. The stories were initially represented by kitsch and macabre paintings with objects d'art signifying horror (skull ornaments, bodily sculptures) scattered throughout the gallery. Serling's presenting style mobilises many qualities of his persona as host of fantasy anthology *The Twilight Zone* (NBC, 1959-1964) and commercial spokesperson (formality, verbose prologues) but there is deliberate ambiguity regarding whether he is playing himself or a fictional character. In the pre-credits teaser segment of *Ghostwatch*, Michael Parkinson is also dressed in suit and tie, facing camera directly and standing with the same gait. The arrangement of skull

ornaments on the mantelpiece and the painting of a pantomime bed-sheet ghost above it (which we do not see yet, but notice in wide shots of the studio following the credits) clearly indicates the homage to the direct address presentation of horror in anthology programming. Uncertainty over the relationship between ‘Michael Parkinson’ the *Ghostwatch* character and Michael Parkinson the personality recalls the instability of Serling’s semi-fictional status within *Night Gallery*. These tensions inform our later analysis of *Ghostwatch*’s use of TV presenters.

(Insert Images here)

While Volk (in Evans 2012: 6) cites ‘the mixture of fiction and fact’ in literature as the ‘reference point’ for the drama in documentary guise of *Ghostwatch*, it is clearly also invoking a tradition of television science-fiction mockumentary and controversial drama-documentary hybrids. There is precedent in broadcasting and public performance for works of science-fiction presented as factual events. *War of the Worlds*, for example, presented a science-fiction novel as a series of newflashes interrupting a radio concert. Hoaxes perpetrated by members of the public and/or artists, such as the Roswell alien photographs and crop circles, manufacture empirical documentation of the scientifically impossible or unknown. Such cultural texts are often surrounded by discourses of public panic and controversy over deception and mistrust. All of which could also apply to *Ghostwatch*. Nonetheless, *Ghostwatch* firmly inserts itself into a long history of television science-fiction presented as informational texts blurring boundaries between factual and fictional formats. In 1977, Anglia Television broadcast

Alternative 3, a drama posing as an edition of a regional investigative series called *Science Report* which bogusly posited that an environmental catastrophe would soon destroy the earth and that a survival colony for top-level scientists had been founded on Mars. Narrated by former British TV newscaster Tim Brinton and successfully mimicking the conventions of the investigative series, *Alternative 3* jammed the switchboards of ITV regional companies with viewers 'terrified and annoyed' by the hoax (Wright 2009: 321). In the investigative programme proper, *Panorama* (BBC, 1953-) fabricated a report into the 'spaghetti harvest' supposedly taking place in Italy and Switzerland for April Fool's Day 1957. The feature was narrated by trusted news presenter Richard Dimbelby and played straight as a factual piece of journalism covering agricultural and international affairs. It invited viewers to take the authoritative and informative word of the BBC over biology and physics. Like *Alternative 3*, *Ghostwatch* places imagery from fantasy fiction within the conventions of factual programming and creates uncertainty and panic in its viewers. From the *Panorama* 'spaghetti harvest' it adopts the concept of using the impartiality and authority of a public service broadcasting institution to present fantasy fiction with the conviction of reportage. From both mockumentaries, the drama takes the notion of using factual television presenters invested with public trust to suggest the veracity of its fictional content.

While superficially no different from previous reactions to factual and fictional hybrids in other forms of culture, the public outcry and critical controversy following broadcast of *Ghostwatch* also relates specifically to a history of television drama-documentary reception. Drama-documentary hybrids developed in television, particularly in Britain, as an incendiary form of

programming, influenced by the political radicalism of British TV drama in the 1960s and 1970s when the form was prevalent. They set out to provoke public debate, to outrage and shock, to challenge preconceptions (both political and aesthetic) and explore social taboos and sensitivities. Drama-documentary programming has been surrounded by debate and commentary in the public domain which extends beyond typical television reception contexts into other media, social and cultural forums - regulatory bodies, parliament, public life. *Death of a Princess* (ATV/WGBH, 1980), a documentary told in dramatized form recounting the story behind the public execution of Princess Mishaal bint Fahd bin Mohammed in 1977, for example, drew criticism from politicians and public figures claiming that it was a dangerous and misleading form for public consumption (Paget 1998).

Ghostwatch inherits this televisual mantle. Volk (in Evans 2012: 7) has spoken about the 'subversi[veness]' the programme achieved by screening on the BBC rather than a less authoritative and paternalistic channel (Channel 4, for example). *Ghostwatch* challenged received notions of the impartiality, paternalism and objectivity of the BBC and called the reliability of factual television aesthetics and devices into question. Public debate about the programme spiralled into regulatory circles with a censure of the BBC by the Broadcasting Standards Council over the programme in 1995. The programme came up frequently in interviews with schoolchildren and their parents conducted by David Buckingham in the school year 1993/1994 undertaking research for the Broadcasting Standards Council for his book *Moving Images: Understanding Children's Emotional Responses to Television*. Recalling warnings about public endangerment attributed

to previous television drama-documentaries, Buckingham asserts that ‘it would not seem unreasonable to conclude that *Ghostwatch* was an irresponsible piece of broadcasting’ (1996: 246). Psychotherapeutic discourse further circulated amongst health professionals following diagnoses of teenage *Ghostwatch* viewers with symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Ghostwatch feeds off the BBC’s reputation for trust and transparency established throughout the corporation’s history. Such a reputation may stem in part from a view of the medium rather than the institution and be attributable to qualities television has that other media do not. Scholars have argued that television (especially the live variety) has qualities of ‘witness’ (Ellis 2000; Durham-Peters 2001). When combined with the BBC’s ‘principle for impartiality’ and ‘stance of editorial neutrality’ in ‘news and current affairs’ programming (Debrett 2010: 35), BBC television programmes purporting to offer factual information carry a burden of reliability. Viewer reactions to *Ghostwatch* were fixated on a broken contract between the BBC and its viewers (Rigby 1996), with many audience responses attacking the corporation for their perceived perpetuation of a hoax in which known and respected BBC personalities and their reputation for reliability and truthfulness were agents (Chapman 1992; Brown 2010). The public’s trust in the BBC is used as a dramatic device rather than being the broadcaster’s policy failure. The plausibility of events taking place is established through the authority and credibility of the affiliated broadcaster as well as of factual television and direct address. Hence the choice to include the BBC logo so prominently in the meta-textual titles sequence.

Michael Parkinson's associations with the trust and authority of the BBC are also played upon dramatically. At two distinct moments in the drama, Parkinson reassures audiences about the non-existence of the paranormal. He debunks the sighting of Pipes in the curtains in the university research video ('Don't see anything myself'/'False alarm') before announcing the haunting of the Early family as a 'hoax' following Suzanne's fraudulent pipe sounds. His invested BBC prestige is used to deceive audiences into believing there is no supernatural presence in the drama making the final ten minutes of perpetual poltergeist activity even more shocking. The ethos associated with the BBC to cover events in an objective and balanced way is deployed as a device for engaging conflict between fantasy fiction archetypes, conceptualised by Steve Neale as 'the sceptic' and 'the expert' (1999: 31-47). During a Pascoe-focused studio segment, Parkinson segues to a satellite link of scientist Dr. Emilio Sylvestri (Colin Stinton) in a New York studio 'to counter any accusations of bias.' BBC news and current affairs programming such as *Newsnight* (1980-) and *Question Time* (1979-) would frequently protect the corporation policy of objective reporting by pitting people representing ideologically polar opposite opinions on the same topic against each other. Here this is utilised as an excuse for Pascoe's parapsychological 'expert' to dialogue with Sylvestri's avowed 'sceptic' of the paranormal. In doing so, the institutional legacy of BBC editorial policy is exploited to produce a fantasy text credible within televisual production and reception contexts.

Ghostwatch and television presentation

I even ended up watching the Terry Wogan show [*Wogan*, BBC One, 1982-1992] just to get the rhythm of how people get interviewed, how experts get introduced, phone-ins, satellite link-ups... it's a very different kind of language. (Volk in Evans 2012: 9)

Ghostwatch mimics with a high level of acuity many features of non-fictional television programming. Volk's references to language and rhythm above point to two of the programme's major achievements: its treatment of 'broadcast talk' (Scannell 1991) and of time and eventfulness.

The variety and complexity of talk on non-fiction television has been recognised by several scholars (Scannell 1991; Morse 1985). As Scannell notes, talk encountered in broadcasting tends to be 'intentionally communicative': 'broadcast talk minimally has a double articulation: it is a communicative interaction between those participating in discussion, interview, game show or whatever and, at the same time, is designed to be heard by absent audiences' (1991: 1). Of course, dialogue between characters in fiction is also 'intentionally communicative', but unlike participants in the kinds of exchanges Scannell refers to, fictional characters (unless they have a diegetic audience) are not producing speech to be overheard. Therefore, it is appropriate and possible in non-fiction for parties in an exchange to, for instance, repeat things that have been said to benefit the overhearing audience. As Volk puts it, 'conventionally in screenwriting you hide exposition, you don't have people standing there telling you the story of their life. But of course reality TV and outside broadcast does exactly that' (in Evans 2012: 8).

Another, and perhaps the main, difference between talk in television fiction and non-fiction is that in the latter key personnel (usually given the title of ‘host’ or ‘presenter’) routinely look into the camera lens and address ‘directly’ the television audience. To make things even more complicated, ‘looking into the camera’ does not always equal ‘directly addressing the audience’. At one moment early in *Ghostwatch*, Sarah Greene (Sarah Greene), as part of the outside broadcasting unit, looks directly into the lightweight portable camera, addressing not the viewer but husband Smith in the studio: ‘You stay all cosy and safe and sound in the studio isn’t it? Well, good luck, and I’ll see you later.’ Then, without a cut, and barely a pause, Greene continues: ‘Now, before we go into the lion’s den, I’d like to introduce you to Alan Demescu.’ The ‘you’ is no longer Smith; it is us, the viewers. This is just one example of complex and yet immediately and easily comprehensible shifts that broadcast talk routinely undertakes, and the success with which *Ghostwatch* emulates this.

To indicate the range of discursive situations used by *Ghostwatch*, here is a list of the fiction’s key communicative set-ups and hierarchies:

1. In the studio, Parkinson chats with and consults Pascoe. Parkinson is permitted to address the camera, and therefore the viewer, directly.
2. In the studio, via a satellite link to New York, Parkinson interviews and Pascoe spars with Sylvestri.

3. In the studio, a bank of telephone operators feed calls to Smith, who feeds them in turn to Parkinson and Pascoe. When Parkinson and Pascoe pick up their phones, we too can hear the people calling in.
4. At the outside broadcast unit in Foxhill Drive, Greene first introduces her technical crew of two and parapsychology expert Alan Demescu (Mark Lewis), and then alternates between interviewing the Early family, addressing Parkinson, Pascoe and 'Smithy' in the studio and addressing the viewer by directly addressing the camera.
5. At Foxhill Drive, Craig Charles interviews other residents, and also addresses the camera in the same way as Greene.
6. In the outside broadcast van, Mrs Pamela Early (Brid Brennan) talks to the studio and to callers. She talks to members of her house in the kitchen, where a video monitor with a constant feed of the camera trained on her has been installed.

A single moment in *Ghostwatch* where many of these intersecting communicative set-ups are shown simultaneously is when Greene walks into the kitchen of the house to make coffee for herself and the crew. Greene's address to camera has her speaking (with fluid transitions) to the crew, the viewers and the studio. Parkinson and Pascoe can be heard by Greene in her earpiece and by the viewer as an audio feed. A video monitor placed on the kitchen counter relays a live image of Mrs. Early in the outside broadcast van, and she interacts with the kitchen via a short conversation with Suzanne. This variety of forms provides an impressive replication of the dense, varied and frequently-shifting texture of 'broadcast talk' within factual programming.

Presentational devices that establish television's temporal rhythm and relationship to the events witnessed are at the root of *Ghostwatch*'s cultivation of horror. Towards the beginning of the programme we are presented with a series of segments which have been pre-planned by the show's fictional creators. Parkinson is in control, often telling us the purpose of segments before they are delivered: 'Let's go back to Foxhill Drive and learn about the toll that living there has taken on the family's mother.' Links such as these, the stock-in-trade of presenters, continue a long way into the programme, but are increasingly outnumbered by interruptions to planned flow. We and the programme gradually move from a temporal orientation of waiting for things to happen ('I'd almost feel happier if something was happening' - Greene) to one of struggling to keep up with rapidly unfolding events. At first this takes the form of interruptions. For example, just over halfway through the programme, we cut away from Charles interviewing a pair of trick-or-treaters to Parkinson in the studio, who says 'Craig, Craig. I'm sorry to have to cut you off there. In fact, I've just heard, er, that we've got to go back to Sarah.'

Towards the end of *Ghostwatch*, the smooth 'communicative intentionality' of the broadcast is progressively eroded. Not only does the programme struggle to keep abreast of events; shaping content into a form digestible for viewers falls by the wayside. Following a range of supernatural happenings in the house, resulting in violence upon the occupants and panic from the studio personnel, the image scrambles and the link from the house breaks. After a moment, a feed from the house returns which shows Greene and the crew playing with the children calmly

in the front room allowing Parkinson to reassure the viewers that normal service has been resumed. This forced equilibrium is unbalanced by live images of an injured crew member being taken from the house in an ambulance. When we return to Greene in the house, she is no longer performing the 'double articulation' of broadcast talk but instead talking only to the camera operator. The final scene, in the studio, comprises an uncomposed, unfocused shot of the host's empty chair, with Parkinson wandering in and out of frame and trying, gamely, to make the incomprehensible comprehensible for the viewer: 'I don't know... there's c-, there's cameras, but I don't know which one's working, I mean, there are no, there are no cameramen. I mean, it's difficult to know, even if anyone's still, still with us...'

Dialectical interplay between planned flow and spontaneous chaos is a characteristic of much television broadcasting. It is evident in the numerous technical breakdowns and/or improvisations within pre-scripted and rehearsed live broadcasts and, as Bourdon has demonstrated, interruptions of transmissions of pre-recorded programmes with unplanned broadcasts. *Ghostwatch*'s adaptation of these broadcasting features within the context of a horror narrative makes such ordinary television occurrences strange again. The oscillation between dead time and a rush of events features in many narratives concerned with suspense and shock, such as horror. *Ghostwatch*'s version of this story model trades on broadcasting in order to achieve its desired effects.

If much horror derives its effect from establishing and then undermining a sense of normality and stability, then *Ghostwatch* must also be counted as a highly

effective instance of a rarely pursued form - namely, *broadcast* horror.

Broadcasting, to a much greater extent than the cinema, or novels, or any other medium in which horror might appear, not only represents but plays a major part in *constructing* the everyday and what it feels like. *Ghostwatch* undercuts the 'dailiness' (Scannell 1996: 144-78) of broadcasting. It invites the viewer to consider the degree of calamity that would first lead to and then arise from the interruption of the 'continuous, uninterrupted, never-ending flow' that is piped into our homes 'today, tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow' (Ibid.: 149).

A further element of *Ghostwatch* which straddles the textual and the extra-textual is its deployment of presenting personnel and their personas. At the time of *Ghostwatch*'s broadcast, *all* the presenters brought with them associations with presenting factual programming. What allows the core presenting team of Parkinson, Greene, Charles and Smith to execute their roles so convincingly is that the fictional characters they are assigned allow them to trade on skills they already possess in abundance. In an important sense, it does not matter to (the real-life) Sarah Greene whether she is steering and clarifying the conversation for the benefit of the audience in encounters with ordinary people or with performers *playing* ordinary people. One part of the 'intentionally communicative' double articulation of broadcasting - the appeals to and acknowledgement of an absent viewer - remains unchanged. It will have helped these performers that - according to a recent documentary - they were given some latitude within a broadly pre-planned structure to speak in an extemporaneous rather than strictly-scripted fashion (*Ghostwatch: Behind the Curtains* 2012) and were surrounded with a simulacrum of the production conditions they regularly encounter in their careers.

As revealed by Lesley Manning on the 'Shooting Reality' documentary on the BFI DVD release of *Ghostwatch* (2002), live studio television conventions were used in production, such as engineering the set to resemble interaction between hosts and telephone exchanges in factual programmes with tele-participation. This helps us understand why moments such as Parkinson shooing away a set technician from the studio floor when transmission reverts unexpectedly to the studio look so authentic; because the environment constructed around the presenters is so similar to live factual television it invites them to react as they would under normal circumstances.

A background in acting for drama will not have prepared actors playing the 'ordinary' participants for the demands of their roles in the same way that a background in presenting will have prepared the presenting team for theirs. Unlike presenters, who can incorporate an extensive awareness of the audience into their performance without damaging their 'sincerity', it is implicitly demanded of a participant in factual programming that there will be a less practiced relationship to the camera and to public appearance. Performance in screen fiction will typically involve the performer comporting themselves in such a way to be coherently integrated within an overall design including mise-en-scène, the rhetoric of the camera and performances of other actors. In factual programming, a certain amount of ineptitude, mumbling or stumbling is what the performance situation calls for. At various points in *Ghostwatch*, Parkinson pauses, rephrases and repeats (see some of the quotations above) to reinforce the impression of unscripted delivery. By contrast, the Early family often deliver lines whose cadence and flow are a little too certain, not in the context of dramatic fiction but

certainly of factual programming. The dramatic register of some of the supporting performances substantiate claims of *Ghostwatch*'s production personnel that the programme was never intended as a hoax. On *BiteBack*, Baumgarten explains that actors known from BBC programmes, some of which were transmitted the week of broadcast, were deliberately cast to safeguard against viewers being deceived by the non-fictional framing of the drama.

The Early sisters, Suzanne (Michelle Wesson) and Kim (Cherise Wesson), stand as key examples of how *Ghostwatch* negotiates the conventions of dramatic performance and participating in factual programming. The artifice of the actresses' performances is signalled to the viewer through the anomalies of two young working-class girls from a council house (and a mother with a regional working-class accent) with neutral, middle-class pronunciation and perfect elocution, even if both actresses are emotionally convincing when faced with supernatural terror. Yet the actresses are occasionally embedded in reproductions of factual formats that allow them to appear entirely plausible as participants from the non-acting public. The informal and playfully improvised scene between Pascoe and Suzanne which mocks up a university research video of Suzanne attempting to impersonate Pipes allows Wesson the freedom of Parkinson, Greene et al. to speak extemporaneously. Kim's appearance - witnessed via relay of a home VHS recording - on a tabloid audience discussion programme (reminiscent of *Kilroy* [BBC, 1986-2003]) concocts a verified document of the sister as an 'ordinary person' on a contemporaneously recognisable melodramatic, segmented, studio-based presentation (not unlike the intra-diegetic *Ghostwatch*) that frames Kim as a guest not a performer.

Another significant feature of *Ghostwatch* that absorbs it into the broader flow of British television is its explicit and often critical reference to the representational apparatus of contemporaneous UK factual TV formats. A national phone-in segment on weekday magazine programme *This Morning* (Granada, 1988-) realised by a videographic outline of the British Isles coloured in yellow against a blue sea with the caller's name attached to their region is reproduced in *Ghostwatch* when calls from viewers are taken. Several newspaper reviewers interpreted *Ghostwatch* as a spoof of BBC current affairs programmes *Watchdog* (1985-) and *Crimewatch* (Hardy 1992). The latter programme is clearly acknowledged not just in the title but audio-visual presentation. Paternalistic public service catchphrases from *Crimewatch* ('please don't have nightmares') are reappropriated in the drama ('we don't want to give anyone nightmares'). Both programmes feature heavily dramatized titles sequences, though only *Ghostwatch* uses the technique ironically. This is by no means empty pastiche however. *Ghostwatch* was satirising how recent trends in broadcasting had impacted on the BBC. The UK television ecology had been transformed by the 1988 Broadcasting White Paper which led to the introduction of television broadcasting outside public service regulation through the launch of satellite television. Volk discusses the programme's assumptions about the contemporaneous BBC's tabloid-style treatment of 'metaphysical questions' that led to the choice of dramatic form (*TV Zone* 2007: 66). Referencing characteristics of non-fiction programmes typically categorised as entertainment (rather than factual or public service television) from commercial channels, or programmes like *Crimewatch* which uncomfortably straddle the line between

‘entertainment and information’ (Newman 1992, 55), informs critical commentary on the BBC’s trivialisation of serious subject matter and British public service television’s increased competition with entertainment programming.

Conclusion

We began our discussion with an examination of liveness, one of the key communicative affordances of television across much of its global history, and ended by exploring *Ghostwatch*’s dialogue with the other programmes appearing on British television in the early 1990s. The relationship of *Ghostwatch* to television’s history - to its possibilities, its programmes, its institutions, its viewers and their habits and expectations - is complex, multi-levelled and multi-layered. Lisa Gitelman has suggested that ‘media are curiously reflexive as the subjects of history’ (2009: xi). Such is the case with *Ghostwatch*. In this account we have tried to capture, and honour, the ways in which the programme is medium-specific. However, we do not maintain a pretence that television is, and has to be, all one way. Indeed, if that were the case, argument would be neither required nor interesting. Another of Raymond Williams’s conceptual models (1977: 121-7) - that of the dominant, the residual and the emergent - is useful to draw upon here.

In 1992, liveness had long been a possibility rather than a necessity for television (including British television). However, it remained a communicative affordance with a strong presence within the medium, and an equally strong imaginative pull. Television on-demand, time-shifting, and internet-based content may be progressively uncoupling television from broadcasting, and

simultaneously pushing liveness towards the category of the residual (though there is still, of course, some way to go before we reach that point, especially if we include all the world's television viewers and not just its wealthiest ones), but this observation can help us to see that when *Ghostwatch* was broadcast, liveness was the dominant way of *receiving* television, and an instantly recognisable way of 'encoding' it by producers, for viewers.

The nature of *Ghostwatch*'s reflexivity and its place in television history seem to be characterised by liminality. The programme is fiction adopting the rhetoric of fact. It depends upon the ability for television to be pre-recorded but plays on its ability to be live. It builds into its very fabric the expectation of a large, co-present viewership, but acknowledges and rewards the possibility of VHS viewing. It plays in several complex ways with the idea that viewers will treat it as part of a planned flow, yet also demonstrates awareness of the possibility that some viewers may stumble upon it unforewarned, coming to it from other terrestrial or even satellite channels. It highlights recent moves towards sensationalism in BBC factual content whilst trading upon that institution's reputation for sobriety. In the terms of John Ellis (2000), *Ghostwatch* stands on the cusp of television's ages of 'availability' on one hand, and 'abundance' and 'uncertainty' on the other, the latter age characterised by a flow of information increasing in both volume and attention-grabbing features whilst simultaneously (and partly consequentially) decreasing in its perceived reliability.

Ghostwatch has enjoyed a cult post-broadcast legacy, thanks to its afterlife on a DVD issued by the BFI in 2002, and more recently its inclusion in a 2012

Halloween 'package' on the BBC's on-demand service, iPlayer. Also in 2012, there occurred the Twitter-based activity 'The National Seance 2012', which encouraged synchronised screenings and live-tweeting of recordings of *Ghostwatch* in the original timeslot (with continuity if possible) on the programme's anniversary. On one hand, these subsequent activities testify to *Ghostwatch*'s ongoing success and value as a work of dramatic fiction. On the other hand, regardless of delivery platform, the text, if it is to be understood and experienced fully, still requires the viewer's awareness of its original broadcast context. The National Seance is not a gimmick, nor is it arbitrary in its object. Recreating the 'aura' (Benjamin 1936) of television in 1992 is essential if *Ghostwatch* is to speak to us, through history, and as history, in the way it intended, offering proof that the programme is an exemplary instance of the work of art in television's age of broadcasting, liveness and co-presence.

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