Ghosts in the Living Room: The Televisual Gothic on Britain's Screens

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Despite their grounding in the past, ghosts are often remarkably modern. Susan Owens argues that they 'are mirrors of the times. They reflect our preoccupations, moving with the tide of cultural trends and matching the mood of each age' (2019: 9). For Julia Briggs, this assigns them the role of custodians: 'Ghost stories are as old and older than literature, and in many pre-literate societies all over the world ghosts act as the protectors and guardians of social values and traditional wisdom' (1977: 25). For her, this is beneficial: 'In an era increasingly characterized by social upheaval, it becomes correspondingly important to retain tradition and older ways of thinking, to remember our ghosts, if we are to maintain a sense of stability' (Briggs 1977: 111). Yet ghosts also hold the power to disrupt, to terrorise, and to call into question the very notion of stability. Our dead, it seems, are far from silent – they 'can, and do, have agency' (Penfold-Mounce 2018: 1).

Television is widely considered apt for representing the Gothic, and even inherently spectral. Lenora Ledwon posits that 'television would seem to be the ideal medium for Gothic inquiry. It is, after all, a mysterious box simultaneously inhabited by spirit images of ourselves and inhabiting our living rooms' (1993: 260). Sconce, meanwhile, argues that, as

> [s]ound and image without material substance, the electronically mediated worlds of telecommunications often evoke the supernatural by creating virtual beings that appear to have no physical form. By bringing this spectral world into the home, the TV set in particular can take on the appearance of a haunted apparatus (2000: 4).

Moreover, the medium's ancestors – the magic lantern, the phantasmagoria and the Eudophusikon[1] – are arguably the *originators* of the mode. Owens explains that

> [l]ight shows had long been associated with the projection of ghosts: a dictionary of 1696 described the "Magic Lanthorn" as a "small Optical Maceehn that shews by a gloomy Light upon a white Wall, Spectres and Monsters so

> hideous, that he who knows not the Secret, believes it to be perform'd by a Magick Art",

while the Eudophusikon 'prompted Beckford to write his extravagant Orientalist fantasy, *Vathek*' (2019: 132). Such technologies even altered cultural conceptions of the ghost – Owens elaborates that '[i]t was only in the late eighteenth century that their appearance began to reflect their insubstantial qualities,' and that '[g]hosts' acquisition of see-through properties … seems to have developed concurrently with developments in optical entertainments and light shows that transformed public entertainment' (2019: 168). Visual media of preternatural representation, that is, not only predated the publication of Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* by over a century, but also inspired literary works that were crucial to the mode's development. This relationship is symbiotic: while 'ghosts have moulded their appearance and their hauntings on the media that transmits them' (Blake and Aldana Reyes 2016: 8), interest in spectrality has also prompted technological innovation. *Late Night Horror*, the first colour programme to be commissioned by the BBC,

> drew on the Gothic, and in particular the profusion of blood and gore required by the *grand guignol* Gothic horror, to experiment with the possibilities of the medium, just as the phantasmagoria showmen of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had used images of supernatural beings to demonstrate the potential of their early projection equipment (Wheatley 2014: 74).

Roger Clarke draws out this formal genealogy explicitly, tracking the progression of ghostly technology from Pepper's Ghost – 'the first 3D illusion [which] featured an actor in a hid in a hidden pit in front of [a] stage; his live image would be projected on to a sheet of glass positioned at the same angle' (2013: 277) – to television. 'No wonder a ghost crawls out of a television in … *Ringu*', he argues; '[n]o wonder the white noise of the television in … *Poltergeist* is where the entity nests most comfortably' (2013: 279). Karen Williams likewise suggests that that '[w]hile reality TV suggests similar tendencies to those of spirit photography, as many paranormal reality shows also claim to be documenting ghosts, the supernatural of

reality TV participates in another genealogy as well: the ghost show or phantasmagoria' (2010: 149). Perhaps the most notable influence of technology on the ontology of the ghost, moreover, is what Neal Kirk terms 'networked spectrality' – a concept that 'aims to account for representations of ghosts that are transitioning from the singular, linear, personal and analogue to ghosts that are digital, multiple, nodular and distributive' (2016: 55). Robert Bartholomew and Hilary Evans argued in 2004 that 'never before has so much information been controlled by so few and travelled so fast to so many. Never has the potential for mass manipulation been greater' (vii). Today, this is even more pertinent, and television remains one of the foremost mediums for the exploration of such potential horrors. In this sense, television and the Gothic share a genealogy that has had a marked influence on cultural perceptions of death and its aftermath. This is a relationship that has led, perhaps inevitably, to the development of the Televisual Gothic.

This is particularly apposite in Britain, whose public service broadcasting behemoth, the BBC, has faced increasing mistrust in recent years. The corporation has, for some time, received criticism from those on the political right. Robert Aitken, for instance, argued in 2008 that it broadcasted 'a superior "enlightened" liberal attitude', through which it 'always challenge[d] the commonsense position from a politically correct stance' (2008: xiv). He draws on *From Seesaw to Wagon Wheel: Safeguarding impartiality in the 21st century*, a 2007 report by John Bridcut for the BBC Trust, in which, in a highly prescient statement, Bridcut argues that the BBC 'missed the early stages of monetarism, Euroscepticism, and recent immigration – all three, as it happens, "off limits" in terms of a liberal-minded comfort zone' (67). Recently, however, the BBC has also come under similarly widespread censure from the political left. Tom Mills argues that 'the BBC's political reporting, which lies at the heart of its public service remit, seems ever more entangled in the world of Westminster, managing to appear both frivolous and elitist' (2019). This criticism has also recently spread to engulf the entirety of the

British political spectrum: '[p]arts of the left have long been wary of the BBC, but equally if not more worrying for the BBC is the growing antipathy of many centrists. Once its strongest supporters, they now accuse the BBC of biased reporting on Brexit' (2009). While Aitken and his ilk accuse the BBC of obscuring Euroscepticism, Mills notes that 'the BBC has been widely criticised for failing to challenge misinformation and misconduct by Brexit campaigners' (2019). He thereby suggests that the BBC is neither inherently left- nor right-leaning, but rather an elite establishment, 'its reporting … strongly shaped by corporate interests, state officials and the political elite – the government of the day in particular' (Mills 2019). The relationship between the world's oldest national broadcaster and its audience is in a turbulent state. Combined with a recent spate of suicides associated with reality television broadcast predominantly on the BBC's first and largest competition, ITV[2], the television has become an increasingly horrific object in the British home, particularly for those excluded from the upper echelons of the nation's socioeconomic power structures.

This article explores five texts that fall under the banner of the Televisual Gothic: Nigel Kneale's *The Stone Tape* (1972), Stephen Volk's *Ghostwatch* (1992), 'Séance Time' (2015) and 'Dead Line' (2018) from Reece Shearsmith and Steve Pemberton's *Inside No. 9*, and Mark Gatiss's *The Dead Room* (2018). These are texts that are not only made for television, but also centrally concerned with televisuality. Each narrative either borrows the format of live, factual transmission or situates recording and/or broadcast media at the heart of its narrative. They thereby reach beyond Helen Wheatley's concept of Gothic television – 'a domestic form of a domestic genre which is deeply concerned with the domestic, writing stories of unspeakable family secrets and homely trauma large across the television screen' (2014: 1). Drawing on Sconce's work, they instead exemplify 'self-reflexive meditations on the viewer's potentially dangerous relationship to [televisual] technology and the phantom worlds it evoked' (2000: 133). This distinction facilitates consideration not just of the suitability of television to

representations of death and the dead, but also the extent to which television has itself become a Gothic phenomenon in late twentieth and early twenty-first century Britain. If, as Derrida suggests, '*one must* reckon with' the spectral dead (2006: xx, emphasis in original), and '[t]he average Briton spends almost 10 years of their life watching TV' (Knight 2018), there is surely no space better suited to such a reckoning than the small screen.

In *The Stone Tape*, Ryan Electrics, headed by Peter Brock, take up residence in Taskerland, a Victorian mansion, to develop 'a completely new recording medium'. Visiting a 'very old' room (*The Stone Tape* 1972), Jill, Ryan Electrics' computer programmer and Peter's lover, sees an apparition of Louisa, a maid who worked in the house in the nineteenth century. This apparition turns out not to be a conscious spirit but 'a recording, fixed on the floor and on the walls, right in the substance of them, a trace of what happened there' (*The Stone Tape* 1972). Peter and his team attempt to analyse the 'mass of data' (*The Stone Tape* 1972) to replicate the stone's recording qualities and patent their discovery. At the film's climax, however, Jill enters the room after Peter has accidentally 'erased' Louisa, who was 'only on the surface level, the most recent,' inadvertently revealing a profusion of 'much older impressions' (*The Stone Tape* 1972). These impressions overwhelm Jill, who, attempting to escape, falls to her death, her desperate screams and cries for Peter etched onto the stone forever. Here, death serves as a source of economic and social capital – patenting their discovery would enable Ryan Electrics to both make their fortune and to reinstate Britain as a world leader in technological innovation. Peter is obsessed with Japan's rise to prominence in the field, delightedly declaring, on identifying the nature of the "ghost": 'The Japs are forced into a blind alley! They've got nowhere! It's going to be ours, all ours!' (*The Stone Tape* 1972). The militaristic nature of this statement is notable – Peter quite sincerely regards technological competition as a form of warfare, and himself as Britain's Field Marshal. Jill's death is a far lesser blow to him than his realisation that his dreams are not to come to fruition. He values

human life solely for profitability, and his attempts to exploit others for wealth and acclaim does not end with their life; death is merely another resource to be mined for capital. Kneale thus establishes a connection between death, the screen and human monstrosity that comes to define Britain's Televisual Gothic.

The Dead Room was produced almost half a century after *The Stone Tape* and the diegetic broadcast at its heart is radiophonic rather than televisual, yet its central concerns are analogous. Set in a recording studio, Aubrey Judd, a seasoned voice actor, records the eponymous 'The Dead Room', a series of horror-based radio plays. As the drama progresses, he begins to experience unexplained phenomena that he realises relate to Paul, his former colleague and lover who, as he eventually reveals to producer Tara, drowned in the 1970s. At the text's conclusion, Aubrey is confronted by Paul's spectre, who reveals that after Paul threatened to out Aubrey, Aubrey knowingly allowed Paul to drown to protect his career. In the drama's final seconds, Paul launches himself towards Aubrey (and, via a point of view shot aligned with Aubrey's field of vision, the viewer), the aftermath of their spectral reunion left ambiguous.

In its early days, BBC policy was centred on a '"basic policy of ultimate good taste", implying an aesthetic of suggestive restraint rather than "improper display" [that] shaped the BBC's attitude to Gothic drama for some time to come' (Wheatley 2014: 32). This emphasis on restraint, privileging terror over horror (as Gothic luminary Ann Radcliffe sought to) was shaped by the retention of stylistic elements from the BBC's radiophonic heritage. As Peter Haining argues, '[t]elevision being a strictly literal medium … [it] can add nothing to a cosy tale of death and diabolism without overdoing it. One way to cope with this difficulty is to show less and suggest more' (1993: 189). Wheatley further argues that

> resistance to the representation of the supernatural on television, clearly rested on a certain nostalgia for the ghost story as told on radio … a medium which

> quite obviously "showed less and suggested more" than television. The challenge for the directors, writers and producers … was therefore established as a need to create atmosphere, to audio-visually evoke the supernatural in mood and feeling rather than to clearly visualise the genre's associated ghosts and monsters, and therefore to develop a restrained, suggestive aesthetic which remained more faithful to radio versions of the Gothic than to its cinematic and theatrical ancestors (2014: 36).

Yet as she also acknowledges, citing David Pirie,

> these literary and radiophonic predecessors were not the only Gothic heritages referred to. Simultaneously, a mode of Gothic drama developed which clearly referenced the "equally respectable Gothic line … which precisely depends upon the clear visual portrayal of every stage of action" (2014: 57).

Notably, then, the haunting at the heart of *The Dead Room* increasingly shifts from the radiophonic and suggestive to the televisual and grotesque. Its final moments are visually as well as psychologically horrific: Paul turns slowly towards Aubrey, revealing empty eye sockets and rotting flesh from spending forty years at the bottom of a lake. Wheatley writes of Robin Chapman's 1973 televisual adaptation of M.R. James' 'Lost Hearts' that 'the "gentlemanly restraint" of James' ghost story can only be taken so far on an audio-visual medium … ultimately, the viewer must be simultaneously "rewarded" and disappointed by the presentation of the horrific moment, if not the spectacularly grotesque' (2014: 54). Here, though, the moment is far from disappointing, as the horror with which the viewer is presented is perfectly apt – Paul's death was horrific, and Aubrey deserves to feel the full force of that horror.

Significantly, Paul appears not as an insubstantial (or televisual) ghost, but as a reanimated corpse. In this sense, Gatiss explores quite a different side of James to his 'gentlemanly restraint'. As Johnston argues,

> [o]ne of the notable differences between the ghosts of M.R. James' stories and those of the majority of other representations in the Victorian and Edwardian period is that they are distinctly physical rather than ethereal. In this, James is borrowing from medieval depictions of ghosts … physical returns from the grave, what we might now term revenants or even zombies, showing signs of decay and decomposition (2015: 46).

Further, he later refers to 'the older conception of the supernatural being which punishes transgression … slimy, and definitely corporal' (2015: 115). Such ontology is, for Catherine Belsey, inherent to their menace – medieval ghosts were 'consistently palpable and physically threatening' (2010: 14). Likewise, Jacque Lynn Foltyn explores popular culture's interest in 'reviving the past "glory" of the pre-modern gruesome corpse, which church and political leaders displayed to teach moral and political lessons' (2008: 168). Yet Paul's corporeality, rather than punishing transgression, punishes the conformity that led Aubrey to allow Paul to drown when he 'could have saved him' but instead 'just stood there, watched him go under, taking all [Aubrey's] problems with him' (*The Dead Room* 2018). Even when Aubrey confesses to his role in Paul's death, he defends himself: 'He just couldn't see how difficult it was for me, someone in the public eye, of getting too well known. It just wouldn't do; I couldn't risk it' (*The Dead Room* 2018). The lessons Paul's appearance conveys are rather different to those offered by pre-modern religious leaders: he returns, in all his gruesome corporeality, to rebuke Aubrey for *not* transgressing traditional morality, choosing his career over their relationship. The text thus challenges the Gothic's habit of 'reinscribing the status quo', its 'resolutions repeatedly insist[ing] on order restored and … reassertion of heteronormative prerogative' (Haggerty, 2006:10). In his committed conservatism and total lack of remorse, it is Aubrey, not Paul, who is most grotesque visitor to the viewer's living room.

Questions of deserving are likewise central to the now infamous *Ghostwatch*, which follows 'a unique live investigation of the supernatural' (*Ghostwatch*, 1992) presented by Michael Parkinson, Sarah Greene, Mike Smith and Craig Charles. At the time, all four were 'distinguished, well-known British TV personalities' (Bartholomew and Evans 2004: 83) – Parkinson for his chat show *Parkinson*, Greene for presenting magazine show *Going Live!*, Smith (Greene's husband) for hosting game show *That's Showbusiness*, and Charles for starring in science fiction comedy *Red Dwarf*. Modelled on the "Enfield Haunting" of 1977,

Ghostwatch is set in and around a house in Foxhill Drive, a fictional residential street in Northolt, London, inhabited by Pamela Early and her two daughters, Suzanne and Kim. The family have reported paranormal visitations from a ghost they call Pipes, after Kim misunderstood her mother's attempt to comfort her by telling her that unexplained sounds were 'pipes. You know, the central heating' (*Ghostwatch* 1992). Throughout the drama, the activity gradually increases in frequency and ferocity until it results in the injury of a crew member, the entrapment (and possibly death) of Sarah Greene, the destruction of the BBC studio, and the possession of Michael Parkinson as, in broadcasting Pipes to the nation, the crew inadvertently create '[a] massive séance' (*Ghostwatch* 1992).

What remains most remarkable about the programme, though, is not its groundbreaking utilisation of the televisual form in the creation and distribution of a ghost story, but rather the extent to which its central narrative conceit was believed by the British public to be a factual representation of reality. As Johnston notes, '[w]hile it is now considered to be a cult favourite and an extremely effective piece of horror television, the response to the broadcast of *Ghostwatch* was dominated by the voices of those who felt they had been "fooled" by the drama into believing that it was real' (2015: 84). This had a profound effect on its audience:

> [i]f its verisimilitudinous recreation of the conventions of live television helps *Ghostwatch* convey the message that television should not be blindly trusted, they tell us something else, too: that the media age has amplified the possibilities of the supernatural, broadcasting ghosts into all of our homes and even making them omnipresent (Leeder 2013: 175).

This suggests that television, when used to convey Gothic narratives, also has the capacity to produce intense affect in adults, which 'can be a result of the threat being … extrapolated into the reality of the reader' – or, in this case, viewer (Aldana Reyes 2015: 17). One viewer, who was twenty-five at the time of broadcast, later recalled: 'I felt literally sick with fear, standing in the corner of my room, peeking out between my fingers … was it only me who was seeing this? And worse, could "Pipes" see ME?' (Robbins 2002: 159). Furthermore, in *Ghostwatch:*

Behind the Curtains, Volk describes how a friend remarked to him that 'I saw [*Ghostwatch*], and I thought it was real' and, when he asked why, she replied: 'Well, when I saw Michael Parkinson' (*Ghostwatch: Behind the Curtains*, 2012). Likewise, a fan featured in the documentary comments that 'everyone just was playing their ordinary roles, and so it didn't seem out of the ordinary, and you were like "it must be true because … Parky wouldn't lie!"' (*Ghostwatch: Behind the Curtains* 2012). Jowett and Abbott argue that 'pseudo-documentary *Ghostwatch* achieved its horror effect by capitalizing on the inherent immediacy and "liveness" of TV broadcast and the apparent authenticity of its events' (2013: 192). This effect is emphasised through the modelling of the drama's title on documentary 'programmes of the period such as *Hospitalwatch, Crimewatch* [and] *Badgerwatch*', reinforced by the fact that 'millions of viewers would have recognized the [call-in] phone number … which was the same number … used for several real-life call-in shows including *Crimewatch*' (Bartholomew and Evans 2004: 87-8). Adding to this is the faithful presentation of both studio and outside broadcasts, complete with trailers and mounted equipment. This is not to say that the programme was produced as a deliberate act of trickery. Bartholomew and Evans argue that 'in the days prior to its showing, [*Ghostwatch*] was … promoted as a "live" documentary' (2004: xi; 88). On the contrary, however, *Ghostwatch* was part of Screen One, a popular drama series that had been running since 1989 and was then in its fourth series, and '[a] cast list appeared in the *Radio Times* and Brid Brennan [who plays Pamela] was due to appear as the lead in a second BBC drama, *Tell-Tale Hearts*, the following evening' (Evans 2012: 2). The first minutes of the programme also include opening credits, in which Stephen Volk is listed as the writer. Volk defended the drama on this basis, characterising the extent of its negative effect on audiences as accidental success: 'If we were guilty of anything, we were guilty of underestimating the power of the language of "live TV" to convince people that what they are watching is real' (quoted in Bartholomew and Evans 2004: 84). Parkinson went even further,

suggesting that those who read the programme as documentary of 'living under a stone for the previous two weeks' and stating that '[y]ou always get a certain percentage who believe everything on TV is real. If people were scared, we did our jobs well' (quoted in Rickard 1992: 40). He thereby suggests that rather than posing danger, real or fictional, to audiences, *Ghostwatch* instead imparted protection, teaching those who place unthinking trust in institutional broadcasters that they do so at their peril.

Fittingly, it was faith in the BBC that most potently prompted paranoid belief in the drama's conceit. Leeder argues that *Ghostwatch* extends the 'televisual uncanny' identified by Wheatley 'beyond the domestic into the broader institutional and national frameworks of "home"' (2013: 137). This is a view shared by Volk, who contends that

> [i]f you're interested in the construction of horror films, it's often about everything that makes you feel safe being stripped away, gradually … and really, that's the structure of *Ghostwatch* … finally, the ultimate authority figure, Parky, is completely kiboshed at the end (*Ghostwatch: Behind the Curtains*, 2012).

By concluding the programme with the image of the ostensibly possessed Parkinson aimlessly wandering through the deserted studio, *Ghostwatch* anticipates what viewers would find most truly horrifying: not Pipes himself, but the notion of him infecting their homes through their television sets, and specifically through the BBC. This is exemplary of networked spectrality, though it has been paid little critical attention – Kirk's only mention of the drama is an acknowledgement that 'the "live" broadcast in *Ghostwatch* [is an example] of the ghost story's concurrent relationship with technological advance' (2016: 54). This is surprising given the significance not only of the impact it had on its audience, but also on the commentary it offers on Britain's collective consciousness. Prefiguring Charlie Brooker's *Dead Set*, which situates Channel 4's *Big Brother* at the heart of a zombie apocalypse, this marriage of networked spectrality with the cultural hegemony of the BBC offers critical insight into the trust that the British public places in its institutions, which it suggests could potentially prove fatal.

In the episode of audience response programme *Biteback* that aired two weeks after *Ghostwatch*, one viewer remarked that 'it was actually, theoretically, a brilliant piece of television … but I also think that you betrayed the trust that the audience has within the BBC' (*Bite Back* 1992). Another similarly complained that 'Michael Parkinson is a well-respected and mature fatherly figure' (*Bite Back* 1992), leading him to presume that the programme was suitable for his children, who it terrified. This coincides with the view of the BBC as 'Auntie' – a beloved and trusted familial figure – and it is precisely this conception of the corporation that Volk sought to challenge. He recognises that the programme sparked

> a sense of anger [because] people trusted the BBC, as a broadcaster, not to dick around with them, or fool them, or tell them things that's not true. Which, of course, is exactly the reason that I thought it was perfect for the BBC to do it. Because the piece, as a piece of drama, was all about: who do you trust? (*Ghostwatch: Behind the Curtains* 2012).

Unlike networked spectrality, this challenge to the British public's faith in, and even adoration of, its institutions has been widely explored. Leeder argues that 'nation-building is very much part of the BBC's mandate, so it is striking to see *Ghostwatch* pervert this agenda into nation-tricking … or even nation-haunting' (2031: 181). Alexandra Heller-Nicholas likewise notes that 'Volk has openly acknowledged that it was his concerns about the mass audiences' often unquestioning susceptibility to television that lay at the project's heart' (2014: 81). Wheatley adds that 'a number of people rang the BBC and ITC to complain, suggesting that the closeness between horror and the familiar could in fact be taken too far for some viewers' (2014: 87) – the familiar here encapsulating not only the contemporary domestic setting, but also the BBC itself. When Bartholomew and Evans argue, then, that, with *Ghostwatch*, the BBC 'created a malicious ghost' (2004: xi), they miss Volk's broader suggestion: that the fictional Pipes only serves to expose the danger that comes with unconditional faith in any institution.

Limited attention, however, has been paid to *Ghostwatch*'s class commentary. While the investigators and broadcasters are largely middle-class, the residents of Foxhill Drive are

overwhelmingly working-class, and it is Pamela's socioeconomic status that keeps her family trapped in the house – as she tells Greene, 'I wrote to the council to try and get us moved, but they wouldn't take it seriously. You know, like I was lying' (*Ghostwatch* 1992). As explicit supernatural occurrences do not begin until later in the programme, it is likely that many viewers who believed the programme to be factual sympathised with the council at this point in the narrative, suspecting that, if not deliberately lying, Pamela was at least mistaken. Volk also acknowledges the role that the media plays in shaping perceptions of class when Pamela explains that the coverage her family's ordeal received in newspapers added insult to injury by making them 'look even more like idiots' (*Ghostwatch* 1992). In ultimately vindicating her assertions, then, Volk offers criticism not just of the BBC and the trust placed in it by the nation, but also of the power of those in authority over working-class lives and the presumption of middle-class intellectual superiority. Pamela's predicament is also underscored by the story Greene tells about her own ghostly encounter. Leeder argues that this story 'evokes the repressed colonial underpinnings of a great many British ghost stories' (2013: 181), the ghost in question being an Indian concubine buried in unconsecrated ground, yet it also marks a point of distinction between her and Pamela. The haunting occurred, Greene explains, while she and Smith were staying with friends 'in the Cotswolds [in a] beautiful fifteenth [or] sixteenth century house' that had 'once belonged to the Viceroy of India' (*Ghostwatch* 1992). When she insists that the experience 'wasn't scary at all' (*Ghostwatch* 1992), the audience is invited to consider whether that is perhaps because she had the power to leave the house, while the concubines haunting it, much like the Earlys, did not. Death, for the disempowered, is far less easy to escape.

Writing on class in contemporary British television, Helen Wood draws attention to geographies, positing that '"the North" offers a gothic hinterland whereby working-class narratives also take on a sublime "othering" substance' (2017: ix), yet London is also home to

large working-class communities. Northolt is one such locality, particularly suited to the Gothic due to its politically liminal status – at the time of broadcast, the marginal constituency of Ealing North within which it sits was represented by Conservative MP Harry Greenaway, who at the next general election would lose his seat to Labour's Stephen Pound by over 9,000 votes, having previously held a majority of almost 6,000. Significantly, then, the Earlys are not the only residents affected by the haunting. At one point, Charles – notably the only working-class presenter, having grown up on the Countril Farm housing estate, described by *The Economist* as a site of high deprivation and 'low aspiration' (2013) – interviews several of their neighbours. A woman tells him that 'some really weird and horrible things happen around here' – a 'wee girl … went missing', 'somebody was knifed … that was five years old' and some local children 'found this dead black [pregnant] Labrador' that had 'been cut open' (*Ghostwatch* 1992). Volk thereby constructs Foxhill Drive as a Gothic space, playing into negative stereotypes of working-class communities as violent and careless before revealing these incidents to have in fact been enacted by the spectral force identified by its inhabitants from the start of the narrative. When that space is extended to envelop the nation as Pipes 'transmit[s] himself through television into viewers' homes and, even more spectacularly, into the BBC studio' (Heller-Nicholas 2014: 79-81), the implication is twofold. Firstly, it again suggests that absolute faith in the BBC is misguided, but it also validates working-class voices, proposing that their struggles could become anyone's under the "right" circumstances.

People living below the poverty line exist in closer proximity to death. In 2020, life expectancy was 72.4 for men and 77.3 for women in England's most impoverished regions, compared to 82.6 for men and 85.8 for women in the most affluent (Raleigh 2021), and for people experiencing homelessness, '[t]he mean age at death was 45 years for males and 43 years for females in 2018' (Deaths of homeless people in England and Wales: 2018). Meanwhile, violent crime was '2.3 times more prevalent in the most income-deprived 10% of

areas [of London] compared to the least income-deprived 10%' (Trust for London 2021). Yet, with a 2020 poll finding that 'the average time that someone [in the UK] could pay their rent or mortgage if they lost their job was 2.5 months' and three quarters of respondents expressing concern that 'if their financial situation changed in just one way, they might end up losing their home, or evicted' (Gelblum 2020), the line between security and vulnerability grows ever thinner. *Ghostwatch* constructs television, wealth and life as porous entities, the barriers between those within and those without ever vulnerable to destruction.

'Dead Line' takes its lead from *Ghostwatch*, also affecting to be a live broadcast of genuine events. It initially appears to be a standard *Inside No. 9* episode, but five minutes in, the sound appears to fail. It returns after around thirty seconds but seems to drop again less than a minute and a half later. At this point, an error message appears as continuity announcer Becky Wright informs the audience that the studio is experiencing problems, but that staff are working to rectify them shortly. The episode then resumes, but the sound continues to appear to fail, so Wright announces that they will instead air 'a repeat from series one … "A Quiet Night In"' ('Dead Line' *Inside No. 9* 4.7 2018). The "malfunctions" then begin to encompass the visuals, too – a corpse-like spectral entity absent from the original episode appears through the window in one of the opening shots before approaching the camera, causing a glitch. The error message returns, but as Wright attempts to apologise once again, she is spoken over by a whispering voice, and asks: 'Hello? Is someone there?' before emitting a piercing scream ('Dead Line' 2018), which is cut short as the broadcast cuts to a CCTV sweep of the studios. Throughout the remainder of the episode, the broadcast appears to be interrupted by frequent glitches, often taking the form of abrupt reruns of footage concerning injuries incurred on live television and the supposed haunting of Granada Studios, where the episode is purportedly being filmed. The narrative concludes with the ostensibly violent deaths of the cast: guest star Stephanie Cole slits her own throat with a kitchen knife after taking a call from beyond the

grave from Alan Starr, a fictional *Coronation Street* crew member who hanged himself in the studios; Pemberton is electrocuted, triggering a power cut; and, without the aid of lighting, Shearsmith falls from an unstable staircase after encountering a spectre.

Throughout the episode, the presence of an audience is explicitly acknowledged, as in Shearsmith's reading of tweets from viewers. Most dramatically, spectators at home are implicated in the episode's final moments: the looped replay of one of the final shots of 'A Quiet Night In', in which Shearsmith and Pemberton's characters are fatally shot. In 'A Quiet Night In', in which the predominant tone is farcical absurdity, this moment provokes laughter. In 'Dead Line', however, it becomes increasingly uncomfortable, forcing the viewer to confront the troubling nature of the pleasure of viewing violent death through the safety of a screen. As Heller-Nicholas argues, video 'technology … has meant that we can control time itself' (2014: 10) – it affords the viewer the ability to rewind and replay favoured moments. Through the closing visuals of 'Dead Line', then, Shearsmith and Pemberton underscore the capacity this has to facilitate sadistic voyeurism. By forcing the viewer to confront the essential *wrongness* of the repetitive viewing of the simulated murder of these characters shortly after viewing their creators' violent "deaths", presented to the viewer as genuine, they invite us to consider the dubious morality of contemporary viewing habits. As 'numbness is the result of any prolonged terror' (McLuhan 1996: 30), the viewer is compelled to reflect on the response that the spectacles of violence with which they are so frequently presented typically elicit in them – or, perhaps, do not elicit. Far from performing the therapeutic function associated with repetition within the field of psychoanalysis, this recurrence performs a function closer to trauma itself. By positioning the audience as the willing spectators of gruesome demise, Shearsmith and Pemberton suggest that the viewer is the true monster.

This commentary is also developed through Alan Starr. Roger Ratcliffe notes the proliferation of soap opera writers' 'desperate attempts to increase ratings when they make

newspaper headlines,' citing the example of 'someone in Coronation Street setting fire to a house containing quadruplet babies [that] had chilling echoes of an arson tragedy, also in Salford, just 15 months ago, in which four children died' (2020). He concludes by complaining that 'no real-life misery seems to be off limits for soaps. What was once a lovely tale of ordinary people creating magic … seems to be in danger of becoming dark and almost Hitchcockian' (Ratcliffe 2020). This phenomenon of writers mimicking genuine tragedy to drive ratings, Gothicising what was once a largely realist genre, is pertinent to the episode. In one of the cuts to a clip from *Most Haunted*, presenter Yvette Fielding refers to *Coronation Street* as 'a Great British institution' ('Coronation Street' *Most Haunted* 7:4 2007). In creating a narrative in which the suicide of a crew member is construed as material for entertainment, then, Shearsmith and Pemberton interrogate this disregard for real human life inherent to current practices within the British television industry. The destruction of its direct participants (Shearsmith, Pemberton and Cole) and threat towards its indirect participants (the audience) in the form of the spectral plea to 'let us be' at the programme's conclusion ('Dead Line' 2018) thereby constitute a challenge to a very real and troubling phenomenon concerning the expendability of working-class life within British television at the level of both production and viewership. Just as the *Coronation Street* writers showed little respect towards the Salford fire's victims, Shearsmith and Pemberton expose the extent to which workers can be treated as exchangeable tools rather than individuals with value beyond their labour. The episode thus examines the soap opera through a Gothic lens that critiques, rather than upholds, such exploitative attitudes.

In 'Séance Time', Shearsmith and Pemberton likewise Gothicise reality television. The episode follows the production team behind a prank television show, *Scaredy Cam*, which was previously cancelled after a little boy wet himself during a live broadcast. Obsessively preoccupied with his reputation, its host, Terry, appears to regret this only insofar as it damaged

his career. This is underscored when he responds to a new participant, Pete, accidentally killing an actor during filming merely with anxiety for his professional standing. Terry is confronted with the fatality of his callousness, however, when the actor's corpse is possessed by the 'spirit of [the] little boy' ('Séance Time' 2015) who, unbeknownst to him, drowned himself to escape the humiliation of having his accident broadcast to the nation. Here, the act of ghost-seeing carries significant implications regarding the morality of spectatorship. Dale Townshend argues that 'Shakespeare provided early writers of Gothic with precedents for two distinctive modes for ghost-seeing, the one tragically figured in *Hamlet* and the other in *Macbeth*' (2012: 43). In the latter, Shakespeare established 'connections between ghost-seeing and guilt' (Townshend 2012: 45) – only Macbeth can see Banquo's ghost because he is responsible for his murder. It is notable, then, that in 'Séance Time', the only character to see the spirit is Terry. There is, however, also another, non-diegetic voyeur: the audience. Marc Olivier argues that 'the glitch must first register with a human subject as error before it can be called a glitch. In short, horror precedes the glitch' (2015: 262). Disruption, that is, is horrifying only when its wrongness is acknowledged. In the final moments of the episode, the audience are positioned in front of the backstage monitor, which they have previously seen glitching. It momentarily shows Terry turning slowly towards the camera before this view is obscured by the spirit of the little boy, wearing an expression of rage directed solely towards the viewer. If Terry is reprehensible for his selfish indifference towards the suffering of others, this suggests, then so are we for seeking it out for voyeuristic pleasure.

As in 'Dead Line', there is also an emphasis on the troubling capacity of modern technology to allow viewers to replay traumatic content – Terry rewinds the footage of the actor's death, muttering: 'What a shame, it was fucking funny' ('Séance Time' 2015). The disruption caused by the glitch and the jarring effect it has on viewers, both diegetic (Terry and the crew) and non-diegetic (the audience), thereby forces an awareness that the normalised act

of observing suffering and death is, in fact, a conscious choice that we perhaps only recognise when our capacity to do so is disrupted. After all, while the events of 'Séance Time' might be fictional, many British programmes explicitly exploit genuine distress for public entertainment – a discomforting reality starkly illustrated by incidents such as the cancellation of *The Jeremy Kyle Show* following Steve Dymond's suicide. Notably, an anonymous camera operator who came forth following Dymond's death described the programme in Gothic terms. In a documentary, he likened the set to a haunted house – 'the horrors that were being committed in the bowels of that building … can never be scrubbed from those walls, ever' – and the programme's consumption to cannibalism – 'this is a production line, this is a factory … You feed emotionally vulnerable people in the one end… it's just like a meat-processing plant' (*Jeremy Kyle Show: Death on Daytime* 2022). This is the reality of reality television. The *Scaredy Cam*/'Séance Time' audience are therefore implicated in 'a Macbethian coupling of ghosts and moral culpability' (Townshend 2012: 45). This poses difficult questions regarding the morality of both producing and consuming media that relies on exploitation and violence, forcing us to consider whether, just as television shapes the nation, viewers with the power to dictate their consumption by tuning in and turning over are equally responsible for Britain's moral disarray.

Dina Khapeava asserts that in the twenty-first century, death has become 'a popular culture commodity and an acceptable form of entertainment' (2017: 182). Likewise, Penfold-Mounce describes the Undead in popular culture as a 'safe morbid space' that offers audiences 'safety from direct personal consequences … a shelter for consumers where reality is suspended' (2018: 74). Britain's Televisual Gothic, however, stands in direct opposition to these assertions. Although viewers are not placed in physical danger (despite what many *Ghostwatch* viewers believed at the time), they are repeatedly forced to confront the ethics of spectating death, particularly in the context of frivolous entertainment. As Carol Margaret

Davison writes, 'Gothicists readily identify death as one of the foremost terrors at the heart of their cultural field' (2017: 1), and yet, in these texts, death is not the primary source of fear. Rather, they force the audience to confront the monstrosity of the living. The walking corpse in *The Dead Room* horrifies not only because it is gruesome, but because it is such a stark reminder of the cruel callousness Aubrey exercised for the sake of his career. As such, Britain's Televisual Gothic serves as a chilling opposition to the necropolitics that define contemporary Britain, in which right to life is increasingly determined by access to capital. Death, it ultimately suggests, may be frightening, but those who are willing to sacrifice human life in the name of capitalist "progress" are significantly more so.

[1] '[A] theatre in miniature' made up of 'a painted backdrop representing a distant vista, cut-out figures and ships and even three-dimensional models [which] were manoeuvred back and forth by a system of rods and pulleys, moving at different speeds to give the illusion of their relative distances', with the addition of smoke, projected lightning and 'sound effects' (Owens, 2019:130).

[2] In May 2019, *The Jeremy Kyle Show* was axed following the suicide of participant Steve Dymond, and 'details [later] emerged of five other suicide attempts linked to the programme', while 'two contestants from ITV's … *Love Island* have taken their own lives' ('Jeremy Kyle: TV on Trial', *Dispatches* 18.11, 2019).

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