

**Millennial ghosts and folk-horror legends: haunted by
British 1970s television**

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Millennial ghosts and folk-horror legends: haunted by British 1970s television

Introduction

My study interest is in the use of folklore in British television of the 1970s and its influence, in turn, on post-2000 British film and television. Macey, Ryan and Springer (2014) note that television can be a powerful socializing agent in terms of affecting popular belief; my wider study will propose that television had at least as much influence as film (if not more so) on audiences, and particularly current creators of folk-horror and, therefore, perpetuates popular belief in British folk legend. As a starting point, I will be looking at the representation of ghosts on television as influenced by 1970s TV; aesthetically and within a context of folklore studies.

Current creators of British film and television folk-horror are doing so with distinct reference to British 1970s media. Folk-horror narratives centre on pastoral settings and folkloric themes from witchcraft, pagan ritual and ghostly hauntings, to stone circles and sinister English villages, all of which occur frequently in British 1970s television and are seeing revival in continuing post-2000 folk-horror resurgence.

Why so many folkloric themes on 1970s TV?

The occult revival in the late 1960s helped popularise folkloric texts such as Margaret Murray's *The Witch Cult in Western Europe* (1921) and James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1922, upon which much of *The Wicker Man*, 1973, and a BBC *Play for Today Robin Redbreast*, 1970, were based). The 70s was an era of societal discomfort; generations no longer understood one another; the explosion of drug, hippy and then punk culture changed society and instilled fears of youth culture in the bourgeoisie (as discussed by Jolly, in Paciorek, 2015: 271). Seismic shifts in gender perception took place with the women's liberation movement, and children were taught to be afraid of adults in numerous public information films warning of stranger danger (such as *Charley Says*, 1973). Robin Wood (2003) describes the 1970s as a period of "cultural crisis and disintegration of society" - a situation in which perhaps, politically at least, we find ourselves in again today.

Parallels between the 1970s and 2010s

News stories of predatory celebrities emerged to prove that children were in fact quite right to be afraid of adults of the 1970s. Within the current 'fake news/post-truth' political landscape, no-one knows what is real, who is lying, what our politicians might do next - once again everybody is afraid of everybody else. Examples of millennial folk-horror in 2010s express this; for example Ben Wheatley's *Kill List* (2011) flips earlier societal fears of youth culture and rural folk witch hunts somewhat to fear of bourgeois elitist cults of faceless bureaucrats and politicians who are the ones now indulging in pagan ritual sacrifice. Richard Littler's book and ongoing blog *Scarfolk* (2013) brings these two decades together, drawing heavily from folk-horror aesthetics prevalent in the 1970s in a darkly comedic way to comment on the 2010s (using an image of young Donald Trump here on fake book cover *The De-Evolution of Mankind*), with the same sense of suspicion and fear of others. This corresponds directly with the atmosphere of creeping horror conjured up in so many 1970s TV programmes in which "the dread conjured up... [evoked] the barely suppressed fears of childhood." (Newton, 2015: 15). The use of folklore and legend in this context brings with it elements of historical truth, evidence that spooky things may be lurking just under the surface of society. Legends are defined by Tosenberger as stories with "claim to real-world or historical truth" (2010: 1.6); belief in such legends *as possible truth* is a significant factor which therefore allows audiences to buy into a degree of plausibility of such folkloric, folk-horror content.

1970s TV as influential

Ben Wheatley, along with a growing number of British writers and directors cite 1970s television as tremendously influential upon their current work; *Children of the Stones* (1976), *The Owl Service* (1969-70) and *Penda's Fen* (1974) are all key examples Wheatley mentions: "Seventies shows...[were] really impactful in a way that drama doesn't seem to be any more. You felt your mind being scarred and you were never the same again afterwards." (in Bonner, 2013). This visceral reaction resonates with others; including writer-director Ashley Pharoah, whose 2016 series *The Living and the Dead* is a story of hauntings woven in with the tradition of dark English pastoral and examines "the rural customs and rites

of an ancient way of life" (Mellor, 2016). Pharaoh (who also made *Life on Mars*, 2006-7), cites many of the same 1970s influences, noting that "the BBC Christmas stories [and] Penda's Fen" particularly left strong impressions upon him (Mellor, 2016).

Reece Shearsmith and Steve Pemberton have made a number of folk-horror offerings in their *Inside Number 9* series; recently *The Devil of Christmas* (2016) which is set in 1977, is about the making of a tv drama in that period, is based upon a folk-horror tale, references 70s TV shows (*Beasts*, 1976) and even employs "vintage tube-based studio broadcast cameras and period lamps to give the studio an authentic 70s atmosphere" (BBCStudioworks, 2016).

In order to begin to illustrate to what extent this influence extends, I intend to use the depiction of ghost-as-monster in comparable examples of British television to draw out parallels that also relate to folkloric traditions for further potential study. There are numerous post-2010 examples I could extend this to but this paper will use the revival of the BBC *Ghost Story for Christmas* tradition; an example embedded into British culture and a staple of the Christmas 1970s TV schedules, that Mark Gatiss states was "as necessary to the festive season as mince pies" (in Earnshaw, 2014).

Folklore theory & Ghosts in folklore

How many of us have gone to sleep with the lights on, pulled the duvet tight, or even visited haunted locations because of ghost stories? Many of us draw perceptions about ghosts from stories; whether written, on TV or in film, and in such cases we are acting on some level of belief, which folklorists refers to as ostensive action. Ostension is a term appropriated from linguistics by folklorists Dégh and Vázsonyi (1983) to suggest a perpetuation of belief; ostensive action is to behave in a certain way or alter ones actions as a consequence of belief in folk myth or legend (an example Bill Ellis, 1989, gives is not allowing your child to trick or treat in case they receive an apple filled with razor blades). There are several permutations of ostension, but the one I am drawing from, coined by Mikel Koven (2008) is 'mass-mediated ostension'. In brief, this describes when media texts present legend materials (whether dramatised or otherwise), and thereby encourage debate (intra- or extra-textual) about a legend's veracity; whether the stories are believed or not or their accuracy is secondary to the discussion of *possibility*, which is an essential aspect of legend. Koven proposes this as a framework within which to study film, television and folklore, and is what I will use to develop the notion of television as an important form of folklore in itself; as a medium able to significantly affect belief, or to affect action in some way.

I propose that television effects two strands of mass-mediated ostension; firstly as a medium within which elements of folk legends are retold and, thereby, perpetuates the possibility of belief in such legends (to use a filmic example, the burning of a wicker man may have become popular belief about British pagan custom whilst, in fact, renowned folklorists have shown that such burnings of wicker colossi "needs not to be seen as "literally" true" (Koven, 2008:26)). Secondly, that within the creation of television itself, when specific *ways* of retelling these stories or legends are repeated or made homage to; and where the same techniques may be employed, this therefore becomes another form of ostensive action (Ellis, 1989 discusses ostension in terms of a guide or map for future behaviours). Therefore, television not only perpetuates folk legends but also specific *ways* of telling those legends within the television medium.

There is arguably a perception of what a 'proper' ghost story consists of: Katharine Briggs suggests that "A satisfactory ghost story ought to be something more than a mere account of an apparition" (1971, p415); that we should learn something of the motives and reasoning for the haunting. Briggs describes one of the most deep-rooted folk-beliefs being "Anything hidden before death, especially money, is said to cause haunting" (p415). The aesthetic terms in which ghosts are most often described as manifest remain transient, or related to liminal spaces: visible but incorporeal spirits, pale and with robe-like or flowing garments, appearing perhaps only at the corner of your eye. I wanted to examine how the *BBC Ghost Stories* capture this in a tangible, comparable way between the original series and the revival - what is visible or discernible, how 'ghosts' themselves are represented on screen and how this oft-cited eeriness is created.

GHOST STORIES for comparison

The Treasure of Abbot Thomas (1974) and *The Tractate Middoth* (2013) are entries in the BBC *Ghost story for Christmas* series which, though almost forty years apart, share many corresponding characteristics lending themselves to textual comparison. Both are adaptations of M.R. James tales, both have period academic and library settings and both have ghosts with characteristics that fit the most popular folk beliefs in ghost legend.

The television texts are each works in their own right; Clark and Gatiss, though reverential to James's tales, are not religiously faithful, making their own unique alterations to the stories: "Clark never allowed himself to be dictated to by the limitations of a script..." which he believed was "not a sacrosanct text." (Earnshaw, 2014: 15), whilst Gatiss fundamentally altered his adaptation; "the story has a happy ending and I couldn't have that." (BFI Events, 2014).

The Tractate Middoth centres around a missing will, hidden by a wicked uncle who "wasn't what you would call Christian in his ways", giving family members only obscure clues as to its whereabouts. Librarian William Garrett (played by Sacha Dhawan) becomes the central character embroiled in the search. This fits Briggs's most common cause for haunting in folklore "Anything hidden before death, especially money". The eponymous *Tractate Middoth*, refers to an actual Jewish religious text and, though itself more of a Hitchcockian 'macguffin' rather than lending integral meaning to the narrative, brings an additional level of legendary belief to the story, typical of James' style.

The Treasure of Abbot Thomas, revolves around a coded riddle which promises to lead to hidden treasure, similarly fitting the folkloric motif of treasure hidden before death. The myth of a monk who has left a guarded treasure captures the imagination of an otherwise cynical academic Reverend Somerton (played by Michael Bryant), who becomes obsessed with solving the riddle.

In both tales, the question of belief in the supernatural is raised overtly - intra-textual debates regarding the veracity of the phenomena are examples of mass-mediated ostension. Academic men (and they typically are men) of scientific reason have to open themselves to the notion that supernatural things may exist, which perhaps leads the audience to entertain and engage in extra-textual debates around such possibilities. At the very least, this could be read as a distrust in the world of science; a suspicion that not everything can be easily rationalised.

Textual comparison: ATMOSPHERE

The aesthetic similarities between the two programmes is striking; the chiaroscuro lighting creates a dark claustrophobia, using silhouettes against windows, which is not only part of creating a period atmosphere but also causing the audience to almost strain to see properly; a fear of shadows perhaps. Heavily draped windows, despite the daylight outside, means the light struggles to get in or is blocked out - enhancing a fearful, unsafe or sinister atmosphere.

The general atmosphere of unease is also created in other subtle ways; for example in *Abbot Thomas*, there are a number of scenes in which hooded, robed figures are visible in the background. Not being able to see their faces plays on the horror trope of *not showing*; the Hitchcockian idea that anticipation is more powerful than the reveal, which causes us to imagine something fearful. For example, as we follow a character walking out of the library, we see this brief cutaway POV shot (less than 2 seconds onscreen) which has the effect of something just catching the 'corner of your eye'; suggesting something noticeable, and yet doesn't show us enough to *not* be afraid; anything could be hiding under those robes.

Similarly in *Tractate Middoth*, the use of robed figures is suggestive (and relates back to common folk tales of robed ghosts); a figure appears in the mist, suggestive of a liminal or transient nature - again here the face is initially obscured, playing on fears of the unknown, though the eventual reveal here (of an innocent looking priest's face) both plays on and then dispels our anticipation of fear.

The use of dust in *Tractate Middoth* is significant in terms of atmosphere also; Gatiss went to some pains to get what he called this "crucial" visual effect just right; (BFIEvents, 2014) capturing something of the

1970s Ghost Stories; (BBC audience reports from 70s often citing atmosphere as key to a 'proper' ghost story). It is an excellent example of something abstract and liminal again, something there but not quite there; something that might catch the corner of your eye whilst suggesting the presence of something otherworldly; a thickly pregnant, haunted atmosphere.

We see characters here eye it fearfully as if there is a threatening presence.

The major moment of terror in each programme involving the actual ghost-monster is surprisingly similar, and in each 35-minute programme occurs about 5 minutes before the end, (suggesting parallels in narrative structure). In *Abbot Thomas*, when Rev. Somerton, unable to resist venturing alone to the treasure in an underground tomb, there occurs a sudden series of fast cuts which, in real time, are of unrecognisable images but, upon freeze frame, reveal shots including close-ups of: a crawling slug, Somerton's anxious face, an upside-down unidentifiable reflection, a cobweb from behind which pours black slime containing something which might be a face or hand, a skeletal hand over Somerton's screaming mouth and a laughing hooded face. This all occurs within 8 or 9 seconds, and the soundtrack is similarly abstract; the music ceases and we hear whispers, what might be a vomiting sound, Somerton's screams and some cackling laughter. All are abstract and suggest nothing concrete; it could be his imagination.

What we do know is that Somerton becomes a changed man after this event, fearfully hiding in his rooms - and that black slime (as seen by him in the tomb) has physically manifest in his hallway, as verified by his charwoman: "the unnatural slime on the floor... that had to be scrubbed". Somerton's assistant suggests that this 'thing' is a guardian that watches over the Abbot's treasure. Somerton describes the spectre as "a thing of slime...darkness and slime". The idea of a guardian is present in recorded folklore motif, but the black slime I have yet to investigate if this has legendary basis or is merely an invention of writer Bowen or director Clark - it is not present in James' story (James only refers to a smell of mould).

The key terror moment in *Tractate Middoth* occurs when the deceased's nephew has found the book and, attempting to decipher it, is apparently scared to death. We see this via both his own and librarian Garrett's POV (who has followed him and watches covertly). Eldritch looks down to the book to see a black splotch spreading across the page as a shadow casts over him, he looks to his side, fearful, as if noticing a presence and then as with *Abbot Thomas*, we see a series of fast cut CUs of abstract images, which includes a hand over his mouth in almost exactly the same way as *Abbot Thomas*. Occurring over 43 seconds, the sequence plays out longer than in *Abbot Thomas* but the soundtrack remains minimal, Eldritch's screams are silent but we hear a breath suggesting his last; perhaps that he has died of shock. It is left unclear exactly what either Garrett or Eldritch have actually seen, or imagined they have seen.

The ghost in both is presented as a non-speaking uncommunicative human figure with barely recognisable facial qualities and similar use of sound, but presented in a transient way, again creating an uncertain, creepy atmosphere. This is also done without any great clarity about the haunting events that occur; the lack of concrete evidence for the audience leaves open questions of belief in actual hauntings or characters' imagination; inviting discussion. It is beyond doubt here that Gatiss has taken inspiration (whether subconsciously, or in a studied manner) from the 1970s *Ghost Stories*. The manner in which the tone, atmosphere and moments of terror are created are in parallel, right down to some details of editing, composition and use of sound.

The presentation of ghosts, using James' texts, matches those cited as most commonly manifest in British folklore - but the television representations in both visual and aural terms also add a unique degree of abstraction. There is a lack of definition to the presence or figure, a lack of complete reveal or facelessness brings perhaps a sense of the uncanny to even a ghost known to be the spirit of a particular person. The powerful impact of the '70s programme with its very brief stabs of horror and the immediacy of the medium of television perhaps had a stronger influence on how ghost stories continue to be created than James' stories alone. Gatiss not only changed the ending of James' story, but also added a new character to add a sinister dimension throughout in order to be, as he saw it, more in tune with the bleak outlook of the 1970s (BFIEvents, 2014). *Tractate Middoth* perhaps shows more in visual terms of its spectre, with the 'reveals' lasting longer and more overt, but these still only last for seconds of screen time. Based on this evidence, this wouldn't have been made, nor in *the way* it was made, without the

influence of the 1970s series. Gatiss has more access to modern special effects technology and perhaps larger budgets than those Clark was working with but, as Clark says in an interview about *Abbot Thomas*: "I would love to get in there with a computer and add a few more nasties to it, even now" (*Lawrence Gordon Clark Introduction*, 2012). Therefore, perhaps Gatiss' twists on Clark's versions of the 'reveal' actually add an extra dimension which Clark would have liked to himself achieve in the 1970s had he the resources at the time.

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