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Something 'wyrd' this way comes: folklore and British television

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Something 'Wyrd' This Way Comes: Folklore and British Television

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Abstract
Outlining key elements of folk horror, this article discusses the influence of British 1970s television upon post-2000 folk-horror revivalists, arguing that television is of vital importance to social and cultural folklore. With reference to Mikel Koven's 'mass-mediated ostension', this study brings together folkloristics and screen studies, and proposes 'wyrd' as a term to apply to eerie, hauntological media with folkloric themes. Supernatural tropes are examined alongside a case-study analysis of the BBC series *Ghost Stories for Christmas* to illustrate how folkloric content is represented on-screen, and how the eerie atmosphere of 1970s television was created.

Folk Horror and the 'Wyrd'

> If you don't scare the audience, you shouldn't be in the business.
> (Lawrence Gordon Clark, pers. comm., 12 June 2017)

The phrase 'folk horror' was coined in 2003 by director Piers Haggard to describe his film *Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971, alternate titles include *The Blood on Satan's Claw* and *Satan's Skin*), now canonized as one of the 'holy triumvirate' of folk-horror films alongside *Witchfinder General* (1968) and *The Wicker Man* (1973). Mark Gatiss, in his series for BBC Four, *A History of Horror*, described these films as sharing 'a common obsession with the British landscape, its folklore and superstitions' (*History of Horror* 2010). A revival of interest in them and other related media texts has gained 'folk horror' status as a sub-genre and increasing attention from both cult and academic audiences. Folk-horror festivals are becoming a regular occurrence around the United Kingdom, while academic conferences on film and television have devoted entire panels to the subject.

However, two elements have yet to gain much serious academic attention to date: the importance of *television* folk horror and, more significantly, the *folklore* of folk horror. Television is a medium at least equally brimming with folkloric content as is film and, arguably, has the ability to exert influence upon a far wider audience.[1] Therefore, it is important to examine how folk horror reflects contemporary interests of programme-makers and how folklore is used by them to lend a sense of authenticity to their television narratives.

Bob Trubshaw notes that horror and fantasy genres have routinely drawn upon folklore with 'assorted werewolves, vampires . . . fairies, trolls, dragons, nasty witches', and recognizes that folkloric elements are borrowed by a wide range of films (Trubshaw 2002, 85). Nevertheless, folk horror is 'not simply horror flavoured with a pinch of handpicked folklore', but comprises far more subtle complexities than the mere presence of a monster or megalith; Adam Scovell notes 'it is the detailed strands within . . . where the true elementals of Folk Horror lurk' (Scovell 2017, 8). The term 'folk horror' also brings with it a certain implication of artfulness and authenticity: Piers Haggard's introduction of the term was to distinguish his intelligently-crafted horror from what he saw as the more formulaic clichés employed by the likes of Hammer. Haggard saw the use of folklore in his own work as an attempt at verisimilitude, to 'tap

into the things which I thought were moving and interesting and which had emotional, historical cultural depth and resonance' (pers. comm., 5 June 2017).

While the term 'folk horror' tends to refer to texts employing folklore and legend in some way and, most often, to 'British movies of the late 1960s and '70s that have a rural, earthy association to ancient European pagan and witchcraft traditions', this loose-knit genre is not always filmic and not *necessarily* horrifying (Paciorek 2015, 9). The eerie dissonance of folk horror can be observed extending beyond boundaries of genre and medium in this era to include science fiction, fantasy, television plays, television series, and even public information films. Such works share much in common with modern folk-horror television as well as other media texts including Richard Littler's *Scarfolk* blog and music released by Ghost Box Records, all of which incorporate a 'sense of nostalgia for yesterday's vision of the future' (Paciorek 2015, 13).

 In emerging writing on the subject, there are recurring references to nostalgia and to indefinable qualities of 'eeriness' and unsettled, fragmented memories conjured up by such programmes. 'Hauntology' is a term that regularly appears alongside folk horror to describe media texts evoking a sense of troubled nostalgic reverberation which, in most cases, stems from 1970s Britain.[2] Folk horror was so pervasive in British television of the 1970s that it accounts for many hundreds of hours of programming, with folkloric themes ranging widely from witchcraft and covens (*Beasts*, 1976; *The Changes*, 1975), pagan ritual (*Robin Redbreast*, 1970) and hauntings (*The Stone Tape*, 1972; *A Ghost Story for Christmas*, 1971-78) to stone circles and sinister villages (*Sky*, 1975; *Children of the Stones*, 1977; and *Quatermass*, 1979).

Many of these themes are being revived in a continued folk-horror resurgence and it is more often than not *television* of the 1970s that is cited as a central influence upon 'folk-horror revivalists'[3] who are producing folk horror and hauntological media texts today (Gallix 2011). *Children of the Stones*, *The Owl Service* (1969; adapted from Alan Garner's novel), and *Penda's Fen* (1974) are among the examples film director Ben Wheatley cites as most affective on him: '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' (cited in Bonner 2013). Bob Fischer describes such 1970s television as 'suffused with melancholy and disquiet', while contemporary musician Jim Jupp explains: 'There was something in the *look* of television from that era . . . there's something in the television images of that period that's just not *right*. It's kind of otherwordly' (Fischer 2017, 30-31).

Here I propose the application of 'wyrd' as an umbrella term to encompass folk horror, hauntology, and gothic sub-genres of media texts that have folkloric content and an eerie effect. My use here is not intended as a new coinage (it has been used in this sense by the Folk Horror Revival community [Paciorek 2015]), but to define it as a considered revival of the Old English term to encapsulate otherwise quite disparate material from a variety of genres. *Wyrd* (the Anglo-Saxon original of 'weird') describes that which is strange, mysterious, or even frightening, and connects the common eerie element across the aforementioned genres (thus avoiding frequent repetition of 'folk horror, hauntology, and gothic horror'), while suggesting a sense of the ancient, the folkloric, and the unexplained. The earliest uses of wyrd in Old English describe agencies of fate and destiny (relating to the consequences of one's actions) or powers of foresight with magical or legendary elements. Later definitions from the 1800s suggest 'a supernatural or marvellous occurrence or tale' (OED online 2017). Wyrd, therefore, appropriately links storytelling and folk belief (and its perpetuation) with more intangible hauntological notions of eeriness and horror.

The Folklore of Folk Horror

Where scholars have paid attention to wyrd film and television, their focus tends to remain on the realm of screen studies, examining generic form, style, and, particularly, on-screen use of landscape. Scovell, in his comprehensive monograph on folk horror (largely concentrating on cinema), expresses a dismissive attitude to folklore studies. Scovell states that folklore academics tend to express 'frowning disapproval' at the 'broad-stroke folklore, [and] historical plagiarism' employed in films such as *The Wicker Man* (Scovell 2017, 29). He makes particular reference to Mikel Koven's discussion of specific elements taken from Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890) which are liberally employed by *The Wicker Man*. Koven's essential purpose, however, seems less to be critical of what is clearly a piece of fiction of interest to folklorists (acknowledging 'it is a bit too grand to expect verisimilitude of anthropological discourse in a low budget horror/fantasy film') than to highlight the relationship between folklore and popular culture. In *Film, Folklore and Urban Legends* (2008), Koven develops the existing concept of folkloric ostension to introduce the notion of 'mass-mediated ostension'. This describes what happens when media texts present legendary materials, and thereby encourage debate about a legend's veracity, framing his exploration of the ideological intent and influence of popular culture under examination (Koven 2008, 33). Koven notes that *Wicker Man* director Robin Hardy and screenwriter Anthony Shaffer 'made absolutely explicit the source materials that inspired the film: namely and primarily, *The Golden Bough*'.[4] And, despite Frazer's ideas and theories being widely discredited by modern folklorists, Hardy and Shaffer 'demonstrate their unquestioning acceptance of *The Golden Bough*'s truths' (Koven 2008, 26-28). Scovell argues that folk horror 'is never all that fussed with a genuine, accurate recreation of folklore' and that 'anything could effectively be put into the mix of practices and customs, and still come out looking relatively authentic' (Scovell 2017, 29). The latter is, though, precisely why it *does* matter; what and why beliefs persist, develop, are acted upon or reproduced in culture is absolutely integral to modern folkloristics, as is the concept of ostension itself. A useful example Jacqueline Simpson gives is the fabricated legend of the three crowns of East Anglia, as used by M. R. James in *A Warning to the Curious* (adapted for television in 1972). The tale is given such 'plausible details, many readers now assume that this antiquarian 'legend' which James wove into his fictional tale is authentic folklore.' (Simpson 2011, 286).

Scovell does, however, recognize that links between folklore and folk horror have been somewhat overlooked, and that 'there is clearly further to go in the mapping of its many furrows' (Scovell 2017, 185). Gillian Bennett acknowledges that popular media can directly influence the shaping of public conceptions about folklore and the supernatural (Bennett 1987, 44), while Deborah Macey, Kathleen Ryan, and Noah Springer also note that television's varied 'narratives, and cultural forms are not simply entertainment, but powerful socializing agents' (Macey, Ryan, and Springer 2014, 6). Therefore, it is of vital importance to clarify and contextualize history and folklore as presented by popular film and television texts *because* of their ability to affect and perpetuate contemporary folkloric belief. For example, Stewart Lee (writer, comedian, and *Children of the Stones* fan) asks Matthew Holbrook, a Druid: 'It's reasonable to assume that your life would have been very different, then, had you not seen *Children of the Stones* as a child?' Holbrook replies: 'It had a dramatic effect on me . . . very much so, because I wouldn't have . . . [otherwise] been introduced to stone circles and paganism' (*Happy Days*, 2012).

Acknowledging the derivation of folklore employed in television is, therefore, an integral furrow to plough in explaining the enduring influence and often-acclaimed eeriness of that which is wyrd. Essential folklore reference tools such as Richard Baughman's *Type and Motif-Index of the Folktales of England and North America*

(1966), Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index* (1955-58), and Hans-Jörg Uther's update of *The Types of International Folktales* (2004) are universally acknowledged as invaluable keystones of classification, but have also been critiqued for being too disparate in their categorizations, making them impractical for use and often arbitrarily applied from one individual folklorist to another (Dundes 1997; Kuehnel and Lencek 2015). What Koven (disparagingly) refers to as 'motif-spotting' is therefore a less useful approach than one based on a more general examination of how (and which) folk beliefs are represented: 'To understand *how* popular film and television uses folklore motifs, we must dig deeper to see what happens when such motifs are recontextualised within the popular media text' (Koven 2008, 70).

Although Koven's mass-mediated ostension is a significant development in folklore theory, this study will concentrate on this latter general approach, using textual analysis to articulate *how* folk beliefs are represented on television and how the affective eeriness in these programmes is manifested. I will do this by examining paradigmatic cases of wyrd British television, comparing episodes of the BBC *Ghost Story for Christmas* series 'The Treasure of Abbot Thomas' (1974) and 'The Tractate Middoth' (2013), both adaptations of M. R. James stories. The approach Jacqueline Simpson uses in her definitive examination of the literary work of M. R. James (Simpson 1997) is useful to apply here. Simpson illustrates how James, generally considered to be the 'master of the English ghost story' (Barnett 2011), in fact drew heavily upon Scandinavian folklore. It is interesting, then, that the combination of this influence with James' own childhood fears, alongside British folk legends and customs in which James was well versed, results in eerily authentic and 'superbly effective' stories (Simpson 1997, 16). Using these adaptations of James' stories for wyrd television, I will examine the extent to which 1970s programme-makers brought their own influences and interpretations to representing folklore on screen and how this, in turn, influenced future generations of television and film makers.

1970s Television Culture

The 1970s was an era in which folklore was treated with some gravity in mainstream media: 'a deliciously credulous era, when reported hauntings would be treated as semi-serious news . . . you could believe in this stuff . . . as a kid, it seemed almost like . . . a fact that there are UFOs . . . or that there are ghosts' (Fischer 2017, 33). The wyrd effect of 1970s programmes also played a part for contemporaneous adult audiences who would have been familiar with folkloric news stories. Vic Pratt observes the era as a 'cultural moment when witchcraft and the occult were no longer ludicrous . . . ancient superstitions seemed to some a viable alternative' (Pratt 2013, 2). The BBC broadcast a solemn journalistic documentary about witchcraft in contemporary Britain, *The Power of the Witch*, in 1971, and the case of the Enfield Poltergeist was a widely reported news item in 1977. In reference to the widespread prevalence of folklore in the media at this time, the character of Norah in *Robin Redbreast* (a 1970 BBC *Play for Today* about sinister pagan rituals in an isolated village) grimly observes: 'Every now and again there's a song and dance about it in the Sunday papers. Devil worship. Graves dug up . . . stories of blood'. In turn, television audiences wondered whether this play 'could really happen' or noted that 'after living in a small village in the South-West we can well believe' it.[5]

The initial swathe of folkloric television texts in the 1970s was catalysed by the occult revival in the late 1960s: 'the 1960s and 1970s witnessed the second great wave of interest in folklore and folk culture of the modern period' (Hutton 2001, 283). This revival helped popularize books about folklore such as Margaret Murray's *The Witch Cult in Western Europe* (1921) and James Frazer's aforementioned *The Golden Bough*.

4

Beyond influencing *The Wicker Man*, Frazer's text was widely drawn upon by creators of wyrd 1970s television. Patrick Dromgoole, producer-director of countless wyrd programmes including *Sky*, *Children of the Stones,* and *Arthur of the Britons* (1972-73), states: 'I was a great believer in *The Golden Bough* . . . Frazer was a hugely authoritative man to me' (pers. comm., 22 August 2017).

The 1970s was a unique time for television as a mass medium in a variety of ways, sandwiched between the 1960s, when many families obtained their first television sets, and the 1980s, when videocassette recorders first became commonplace, leading into the digital era when the recording of every aspect of our lives became a constant reality. Television programmes in the 1970s were either broadcast live or were transmitted and then gone, with no possibility to rewind, rewatch, or catch up later. Also, in an era when television was less determinedly chasing ratings, commissioners made space for more ambitious, intellectually challenging fare such as the *Play for Today* (1970-84) series, which included a number of wyrd offerings, and such programmes that left a strong impression might often leave viewers with just that—a profound yet fuzzy memory of an image or atmosphere. Bob Fischer describes the generation of the 1970s as 'amongst the last to remember their childhoods in this fractured, dreamlike fashion . . . the last 'analogue' generation' (Fischer 2017, 36).

Most 1970s British viewers were restricted to three channels: BBC One, BBC Two, and ITV.[6] Television audiences were thereby much more highly concentrated, and some popular programmes were treated as national events watched by the whole family (such as *Doctor Who*, on BBC One from 1963 onward), often excitedly discussed in playgrounds and workplaces at the first opportunity. Thus the influence and reach of individual television programmes was much greater than today, with the proliferation of channels and dilution of audiences that followed the arrival of the internet from the 1990s onward. In illustration, the BBC ghost story 'The Treasure of Abbot Thomas' was originally broadcast on 23 December 1974, BBC One, at 11:35pm and achieved 5.3 million viewers, which was 9.5 per cent of the total UK population in 1974, and sixty-two per cent of everyone watching television during that timeslot.[7] In comparison, the 2013 BBC ghost story 'The Tractate Middoth' was originally broadcast on 25 December on BBC Two at 9:30pm. In this prime-time slot, the programme gained 1.7 million viewers, which was 1.5 per cent of the total UK population in 2013 and just four per cent of everyone watching a main UK channel (BBC One, BBC Two, ITV, Channel Four, or Channel 5) at the time.[8]

The notion of almost two-thirds of the television viewing population watching the same programme at the same time has become so distant in the digital age that 'event television' has been reinvented as a modern marketing concept. Entire series (such as *Stranger Things*, 2016 onward) are now released at once as digital box sets, consumed as quickly as possible to avoid 'spoilers', and channels have returned to presenting live television events:

> Viewers are actually watching more television but less of this viewing is collective, or taking place at the same time. This rise of an 'on-demand culture' has led to live (or 'as live') 'event television' programmes such as . . . *Strictly Come Dancing* (BBC) which cannot be time shifted, precisely because the pleasure is about the here-and-now result . . . (Ibertazzii and Cobley 2013, 523)

Today's broadcasters fight for a share of a larger and more disparate audience who are also able to record and watch time-shifted programmes across multiple devices. Therefore, the entire culture of television viewing was different in the 1970s: *all* television in the 1970s was 'event' television. Programmes were often reasons for social

gatherings, previews and reviews of programming in print media and television guides were widely read, therefore, programming could achieve far greater influence and impact in a number of ways.[9]

The format of television itself is recognized by writers and directors such as Robert Wynne Simmons as having potential to add plausibility to folkloric narratives:

> Television, as opposed to film, is largely a medium that's associated with journalism . . . it's very powerful when it uses the documentary element . . . this could be real . . . you can step, very easily, from normal events into supernatural events and then back again (pers. comm., 22 May 2017).

Thus, programme-makers combined the unique format of television and technologies available to them with their contemporary folkloric interests to lend credibility to their work. Piers Haggard, in applying folklore to his brand of horror, was 'trying all the time to make it more credible, more authentic' (pers. comm., 2017). Alan Garner, too, renowned for his keen involvement in television productions of his own work such as *Red Shift* (1978) and *The Owl Service* (1979), used 'mythology and folklore . . . not to deflect the attention away from reality but to focus the attention . . . on the reality behind apparent reality; the reality behind the three-dimensional world' (Orme 1980).

Subsequently, when specific *ways* and techniques of retelling folkloric stories or legends are repeated by post-2000 folk-horror revivalists, this suggests a conviction on their part that techniques employed by wyrd programmes of the 1970s were the most effective ways to present folk horror. For example, until the 1980s television broadcast cameras used cathode-ray tubes, which often produced unplanned lighting effects of ghostly traces across the screen in conjunction with camera movements. The creators of the *Inside No.9* episode 'The Devil of Christmas' (2016) chose to use vintage 1970s cameras in order to achieve an 'authentic re-creation' of the atmosphere and the look of 1970s television (writer-actor Steve Pemberton cited in Oglethorpe 2016); producer Adam Tandy explicitly hoped that it 'recaptures the spirit' of eerie programming from the era (*Inside No. 9* 2016). This recalls Koven's ideas of mass-mediated ostension, with the programme-makers deliberately acting ostensively: consciously bringing a particular look, feel, and approach derived from 1970s horror in order to achieve a special kind of eeriness to the presentation of unsettling tales.

Analysis: Ghost Stories for Christmas

In order to examine the manifestation of eeriness and how the supernatural is represented on television, I will discuss the content and structure of 'The Treasure of Abbot Thomas' which has elements in common with 'The Tractate Middoth' beyond both being adaptations of James' stories.[10] Both programmes have period settings in academic libraries, both have ghosts with characteristics that match the most popular folk beliefs in ghost legend, and both have a 'haunting atmosphere'. Directors Lawrence Gordon Clark and Mark Gatiss were reverential towards but not religiously faithful to James' tales, having made their own unique alterations to the stories.

It is important to note that, although the last three instalments in the 1970s *Ghost Story* series are not adaptations of M. R. James stories, it is to James that the folk horror ghost story revival has returned. The apparently very British antiquarian milieu of James' tales is epitomised by other television retellings such as *Ghost Stories for Christmas with Christopher Lee* (2000), in which the eponymous icon of British horror plays the part of James, seated by a roaring fire while recounting his ghostly fare to his students.

Although James draws from a number of sources, including British folklore, his spectres tend to be influenced most heavily by the Danish folk narratives of malevolent ghosts. The Jamesian ghost is usually 'palpably physical, menacing, evil or vengeful' rather than the more penitential British type (Simpson 1997, 12). However, James' use of lore and legend allowed for a degree of authenticity and, for many, James' work epitomises the notion of a 'proper' ghost story.

'The Treasure of Abbot Thomas' (1974) and 'The Tractate Middoth' (2013)

'The Treasure of Abbot Thomas' is the fourth in the original BBC *Ghost Story for Christmas* series. The story revolves around a scholar of medieval history, Reverend Somerton, who discovers a number of clues and a coded riddle promising to lead to hidden treasure. The local legend of a mischievous hooded monk who has left a guarded treasure captures the imagination of Somerton, an otherwise cynical academic who becomes consumed with an obsessive need to solve the puzzle. The haunting spirit matches those elements which Katharine Briggs cites as the most common in folklore: the haunting is caused by something 'hidden before death, especially money' (Briggs 1971, 415). The eighteenth-century motifs of 'evil men' and 'intense malice', which Bennett notes as a rationale for the belief in supernatural phenomena, are in play here also.

These motifs are no less applicable to the revenant in 'The Tractate Middoth' which, in keeping with the tradition of the original BBC TV series, returns to M. R. James for its source material. 'The Tractate Middoth' centres on a missing will, hidden by a wicked uncle who, upon his deathbed, pits family members against each other by giving them only obscure clues as to its whereabouts. The first to find and decipher it will be the sole beneficiary of his fortune. Again, in keeping with what Briggs notes as commonly cited elements of supernatural folklore, the ghost is of a specific individual, an evil man toying with his family from beyond the grave. As Simpson points out, this maliciousness of spirit is very much in the Scandinavian folkloric tradition and thus more Jamesian than the 'humble' British ghost. The titular 'Tractate Middoth' refers to a real Jewish religious text and, though itself more of a Hitchcockian 'MacGuffin' than integral to the narrative, this brings an additional level of authenticity to the story, typical of James.

Comparable with Somerton's driven obsession in 'Abbot Thomas', William Garrett, a librarian in 'The Tractate Middoth', becomes embroiled in the search for the book within which the wicked uncle's will has been hidden. The surviving niece, Mary Simpson, has been given only some numbers; a code which Garrett becomes fixated upon cracking. Garrett is haunted by the mystery and the plot follows the unravelling of the whereabouts of the will.

In both television adaptations, the question of belief in the supernatural is raised overtly, with a suggestion that Somerton and Garrett, initially at least, perceive folk belief as something to be wary of or ridiculed. Both educated men of scientific reason are, nevertheless, shaken and forced to consider the possibility that stranger things may exist. Somerton, at the beginning of the episode, is clearly marked as a cynic, mocking acquaintances who are holding a séance by informing them that they 'would have been burned as witches . . . these are more enlightened times are they not?' Yet his experiences while hunting the hidden treasure cause him to reconsider his position: Somerton's protégé Peter asks his teacher, incredulously, 'You really believe, do you not?' Similarly, Garrett, after experiencing a haunting presence in the library, asks a colleague: 'Things like that just don't happen anymore, do they?' His colleague retorts that this 'suggests you believe that once they did . . . We used to believe . . . that the moon was made of green cheese' to which Garrett wonders aloud, 'Maybe it is'.

Because manifestations of spirits are most commonly described in folklore as transient or incorporeal, tending to occupy liminal spaces, it is useful to examine the way hauntings and ghosts are represented on screen. However eerie or hauntological the effect of a wyrd television programme may be intended to be, the nature of the medium nonetheless requires practical decision-making by programme-makers about how to realize such apparitions and uneasy atmospheres tangibly on-screen. These effects are created in a number of subtle ways in both programmes. Despite bright daylight outside struggling to make its way into the indoor locations, chiaroscuro lighting is used to create a dark claustrophobia and people are framed as silhouettes against heavily draped windows. The effect of this not only suggests period atmosphere, but also causes the viewer to strain to see properly; the shadows create a sinister, unsettled discomfort.[11]

The mise-en-scène, location filming, editing, and camerawork also contribute to the sense of being unsettled. For example, in 'Abbot Thomas', there are a number of early scenes (filmed at Wells Cathedral) in which hooded, robed figures are visible in the background of shots focusing on Somerton and Peter. This is as may be expected at a seminary, but their lingering presence in the distance suggests sinister lurking rather than regular daily activity. Clark states that he likes to use historical locations as they

> allow the camera to track behind the character as he leads us deep into the story. Half-seen, cowled figures can lurk in any alcove, establishing the aura of mystery, scholarship and surprise that James loved to tease his reader with.
> (pers. comm., 16 June 2017)

In one scene, the camera follows Peter walking out of a library (above Wells Cathedral cloisters), and briefly cuts away to his point-of-view of a hooded figure whose face is concealed, which suggests something disconcerting. The brevity of the shot has the effect of something just 'catching the corner of your eye', implying something that is out of the ordinary, possibly unnatural.

Similarly, 'The Tractate Middoth' uses robed figures as visually suggestive of the supernatural. One such figure appears on the platform of a railway station, with steam from the train being evocative of an ethereal mist. In the mist, the figure's face is obscured, which draws upon a fear of the unknown or unnatural. A lack of complete reveal here and the blink-and-you'll-miss-it editing in 'Abbot Thomas' help to maintain an unsettled atmosphere. The audience is never given quite enough time or information to define what is being shown, while characters like Somerton and Garrett are no longer certain what to believe, what they have glimpsed, or what they may be about to see. The audience is therefore encouraged to peer, curiously and fearfully, into the mist along with them.

As well as the use of mist and briefly-glimpsed or obscured visuals, dust and shadows accentuate a disconcerting atmosphere. In 'Abbot Thomas', Peter and Somerton discuss the mystery of the hidden treasure while standing by a huge stained-glass window. Very briefly and suddenly (in less than two seconds of screen time) an unexplained shadow flickers past the window which, combined with a loud fluttering sound, causes the characters to start, unsettling both them and the audience. In 'The Tractate Middoth', Mark Gatiss painstakingly worked on the visual effect of slow-drifting dust, believing it to be 'absolutely crucial' to capturing something of the 1970s television ghost stories (The Tractate Middoth Q&A 2013). The dust is used as a recurrent motif to create a thickly pregnant, haunted atmosphere, and characters eye it fearfully as if there is a threatening otherworldly presence. Gatiss's style reveals not only a

nostalgia for the 1970s series, but also a belief in the techniques employed as those most effective in creating on-screen eeriness.

In each programme, the haunting spirits themselves make 'appearances' in what are key moments of horror. Their on-screen representations, however, tend to remain briefly and are suggestive or transient rather than taking a clearly defined form. Helen Wheatley notes that the most eerily effective ghost-story adaptations avoid 'the horror of visceral excess and abjection', and centre instead on 'the *suggestion* of a ghostly presence' (Wheatley 2006, 55). The use of sound is just as significant as the image, if not more so, in creating this suggestion, illustrated in 'Abbot Thomas' when we witness what Somerton (at least momentarily) believes to be a supernatural attack. In a scene when both Somerton and Peter are beginning to track down the Abbot's treasure, sudden jarring music suggests danger. While Somerton is surveying the grounds from a church roof, something suddenly frightens him. In a fast-cut series of shots, he looks up in fear, and there is a fluttering sound and the visual effect of something black flapping violently between Somerton's face and the camera. All of this is over within five seconds of screen time. Somerton's extreme fearful reaction clearly implies a haunted presence in a moment of terror, but this remains ill-defined. A final cutaway to a shot of black crows flying in the distance make this moment more ambiguous, suggesting that perhaps Somerton was unsettled by a bird or merely imagined something.

A comparable moment in 'The Tractate Middoth' is somewhat more concrete. When Garrett reaches the section in the library where the eponymous book is held, he sees a cloaked figure standing still, with its back to him. Although surrounded by a transient aura of dust, the figure slowly turns to reveal a horrific, skeletal face to Garrett, who faints in terror. The sequence is longer than Somerton's experience (running to forty-three seconds), but the apparition's face is only on-screen for seven seconds of this.

The terror denouements in each programme are remarkably similar. Towards the end of 'Abbot Thomas' Somerton, unable to resist greed or curiosity, ventures alone into an underground tomb to uncover the treasure and solve the mystery once and for all. When he finds the spot, there is a sudden series of fast-cut shots which, in real time, are so brief that the images are unrecognizable. However, freeze-framing reveals a series of close-ups including: a slug crawling across a carved statue face; Somerton's anxious face; an upside-down, unidentifiable reflection of a face in what might be a puddle; a cobweb through which black slime pours, along with something which might be a face or hand; a skeletal hand over Somerton's screaming mouth; and a laughing, hooded (unidentified) face. This all occurs in less than nine seconds, and the soundtrack is similarly disparate: as the music ceases, we hear whispers, what might be a vomiting sound, Somerton's screams, and someone's cackling laughter.

While the audience is left wondering what 'actually' occurred, it is made clear that Somerton becomes a changed man after this event. He hides fearfully in his rooms and we learn for certain that the black slime (linking to what Somerton apparently saw in the tomb) has manifested in his hallway, as verified by his charwoman: 'the unnatural slime on the floor, all over my carpet, the stairs . . . that had to be scrubbed'. Apparently (assuming Somerton did not himself track the slime in), Somerton has been followed home by a spirit, which he describes as 'a thing of slime . . . darkness and slime'. Peter suggests that this thing is a guardian, not tied to one haunted location, that the Abbot put in place to watch over his treasure.

The major moment of terror in 'The Tractate Middoth' occurs when Mary Simpson's brother, Eldritch, finally has the book in his hands and retreats into secluded woodland to examine it. Unable to decipher the will hidden within, he experiences a moment of horror not unlike Somerton's. We are shown this moment in a combination

of Eldritch's own point of view and that of Garrett, who has covertly followed Eldritch into the woods. What the audience sees blurs lines between what we are to accept as possible 'reality' and what perhaps is simply the imagination of characters.

As Eldritch looks down at the book, we see what looks like a black ink spot spreading out across the page; frequent cutaways to Garrett watching Eldritch reinforce that we are watching from Garrett's perspective. A shadow is cast across Eldritch, which causes him to look fearfully to his side, and then we see a series of fast-cut extreme close-ups of hard-to-define images, some of which could be from the apparition's point of view. These images include a shot of the unpleasant face Garrett saw earlier and a skeletal hand over Eldritch's mouth (in an almost exact recreation of the corresponding shot of Somerton in 'Abbot Thomas'). This sequence is four times longer than the 'Abbot Thomas' stab of terror; however, all of the shots here are distorted, in soft focus with desaturated colour. All natural sounds fade quickly from the soundtrack and are replaced with an intense, high-pitched ringing, whistling sound which is evocative of an unnatural scream. We see Eldritch scream, but his screams are silent, although we do eventually hear what we assume to be his last breath as he dies of shock. These techniques create an otherworldly moment; a 'betwixt and between' scene within a scene, disjunctive with shots immediately before and after this sequence, which are of bright, lush, green woodland, where we can also clearly hear cheery birdsong.

As Eldritch falls to the ground, in a shot back in the 'natural world', Garrett rushes to him and calls for help. It is unclear exactly what Garrett has seen, whether an apparition or merely a man falling to the ground, or perhaps he imagined reasons for Eldritch collapsing based on his own earlier experience in the library. I propose that Gatiss has drawn directly from the 1970s Ghost Stories in the creation of wyrd, unsettling moments here. The manner in which the tone, atmosphere, and moments of terror are created seems to be in parallel with those in 'Abbot Thomas', right down to details of editing, composition, and use of sound.

The apparition, in both examples, is presented as an uncommunicative human figure with barely recognizable facial qualities and is accompanied by a use of unnatural sound. The manifestation, though a figure, is presented in a transient, unfamiliar way, creating a sense of the uncanny and, therefore, an eerie atmosphere. The viewer is left with no clear explanation and suggestion remains open to possibilities of both belief and disbelief. The open ending of 'Abbot Thomas' blurs possibilities further, in which we see Somerton in a wheelchair, recovering from an attack of nerves. As he is told his doctor is due to visit, the camera cuts to Somerton's anxious face, then to a point-of-view shot showing he is being approached by a hooded, robed figure. The figure's face is obscured in silhouette, and lens flare in the camera suggests a clouding of Somerton's, and our, vision, signifying a fearful presence. A brief insert shot of the black slime seen earlier reinforces this sinister approach but, equally, might be reflective of Somerton's memory and anxious mental state. A final wide shot of Somerton in his wheelchair amid open, abandoned grounds leaves him appearing very small and vulnerable as the robed figure continues striding closer and closer towards Somerton without slowing in pace. The audience is left to consider a variety of possibilities: Somerton has had a breakdown and imagined everything; Somerton has had a breakdown because he has been haunted; or perhaps Somerton continues to be tormented by a malevolent guardian spirit which has attached itself to him. We do know that he is a changed man, who has gone from expressing confident scientific reason to anxious vulnerability and fear of the supernatural which, in turn, leaves the audience unsettled and the story's end open to debate and interpretation.

The presentation of ghosts in adaptations of M. R. James's texts is consistent with the tales about ghosts cited by Briggs as most commonly manifested in British folklore.

However, the televisual representations of these ghosts also lend an extra degree of distinction in that both tales diverge from James's original stories. The 'Abbot Thomas' screenplay (adapted by John Bowen who also wrote the television play *Robin Redbreast*, which bursts with folklore and pagan ritual) merges the book's main character of Mr Somerton, 'a man of leisure' (James 1992, 155), with Mr Gregory, a rector. The reinvention of Somerton as an academic scholar of religion accentuates the internal, ideological anxiety Somerton faces when experiencing supernatural events. The television programme also invents a new opening scene wherein Somerton mockingly debunks a séance by way of introducing him as a man of scientific method. James's story suggests an ambiguous unease which slowly builds over time, from characters expressing general, non-specific forebodings through to the revelation of the final horrific encounter. There are no comparable physical manifestations in James's writing of 'haunting' moments as with the televised 'flapping' in Somerton's face which startle and unsettle the viewer. Instead, James uses ambiguous suggestion to build the reader's expectation to a grand climax where his terror denouement is explored in detail throughout the final six pages. Given that the story is just twenty-nine pages long, this 'horror moment' which lasts for only a few seconds on-screen, comprises twenty per cent of the entire written story. The experience in the vault (originally at the bottom of a well) is picked over in detail by James twice, as two different characters (Somerton and his manservant Brown) take turns to recount their recollection of events. Somerton's account in the written text is largely descriptive of his own anticipation, fear, and repulsion while the entire event takes place in darkness, and the manifestation of the supernatural itself is described initially as a bag which, when slipping off a ledge '*put its arms around my neck*' (James 1992, 175; italics in the original). Somerton goes on to describe a smell of mould, a cold face pressed against his own, and a creature 'with several . . . legs or arms or tentacles' (James 1992, 176), while Brown describes an old man, 'the face very much fell in, and larfin'' (James 1992, 177). James combines references to darkness, smell, touch, and sound over a number of pages to create in the mind of the reader an overwhelmingly unpleasant sensory experience. If Clark, however, had dwelt on outlining the 'terror' in such protracted lengthy detail, it would substantially diminish any shock impact on an audience, and thereby his goal of making on-screen ghosts 'both frightening and believable . . . a challenge I love and something I believe I share with James' (pers. comm., 12 June 2017). However, as much as Clark admired the work of James, he refers to Alfred Hitchcock as 'My other master' who 'understands better than any other director . . . how to stretch his audience's nerves to screaming point' (pers. comm.). Therefore, in employing techniques unique to the screen (of fast-cut editing, location filming, close-up framing, and atmospheric sound design), Clark creates a distinctive televisual sense of terror, while remaining true to the sensory abstraction which James's story communicates.

A small, but fascinating, detail in Gatiss's adaptation of 'The Tractate Middoth' is the alteration of Eldred's name to Eldritch. Eldred is a name of Anglo-Saxon origin and is composed of elements with meanings of 'old' and 'counsel', suggesting wisdom. Eldritch, however, is an adjective describing that which is unnatural, ghostly, and weird (OED online) and, therefore, is an agreeably wyrd embellishment in this context. Garrett's initial shock in the library is present in both story and television adaptation, Gatiss having faithfully interpreted James's frequent references to cobwebs, musty atmosphere, and dust surrounding an encounter with an unpleasant cloaked figure. The tone of the denouement is similarly adhered to, as James describes something black dropping onto the book Eldred is examining, which leads to the appearance of 'a dark form . . . and from it two arms enclosing a mass of blackness came before Eldred's face and covered his head and neck' (James 1992, 232). This, however, is the totality of the

description of the apparition James gives, which contrasts with Gatiss's representation clearly showing the same presence appearing at the beginning and end of the piece (and, briefly, in the middle, during a nightmare Garrett has on the train—a scene added by Gatiss). Gatiss thus removes a degree of ambiguity around the haunting. James's text contains no further apparent haunting, and ends with an overt implication that Garrett had been quietly scheming all along to become 'prospective owner of Bretfield Manor, now in the occupation of his mother-in-law, Mrs. Mary Simpson' (James 1992, 234). The cynical motivation of human greed is downplayed by Gatiss, who presents Garrett as a helpful innocent and makes the possible return of the supernatural threat the main focus. Although it is obvious Garrett has a romantic relationship with the young Miss Simpson, after the couple enters the newly-inherited property at the end of Gatiss's adaptation, the concluding emphasis remains on the threat of a supernatural presence in a close-up shot of a shadow falling across the doorway behind them as thick dust begins to drift in.

Though Gatiss's apparition is recognizable from one appearance to the next, in both television texts there is a lack of definition to the threatening presence or figure; a facelessness or lack of complete reveal which brings a wyrd sense of the uncanny to even a ghost known to be the spirit of a particular person. The powerful impact of the 1970s programme with its very brief stabs of unsettling horror has had a stronger influence on how ghost stories continue to be made than merely James's stories alone. Gatiss in fact remarked that he changed the ending of James's story in order to be, as he saw it, more in tune with the bleak outlook of the 1970s: 'the original text has a happy ending and I couldn't have that' (The Tractate Middoth Q&A 2013). 'The Tractate Middoth' is more revealing of its spectre, with the recurring on-screen presence lasting longer, but this is still only visible for seconds of screen time. Gatiss also has more access to modern special-effects technology and, likely, much larger budgets than those Lawrence Gordon Clark was working within but, as Clark says in his DVD introduction to 'The Treasure of Abbot Thomas', 'I would love to get in there with a computer and add a few more nasties to it, even now' (Clark 2012). So, perhaps Gatiss has realized what Clark would have liked to achieve had he had the resources at the time and, in paying homage to work created in the 1970s, has revived and is perpetuating (as a form of Koven's mass-mediated ostension) preferred ways of effectively representing the supernatural on-screen.

Conclusions

Gillian Bennett remarks that commerce and popular culture have created cartoonish stereotypes of the supernatural that only exist in film and television as forms of entertainment, suggesting that the 'supernatural has been officially demoted to the nursery world of grown-ups and children alike, where it is frankly so synthetic a concept that it can serve no useful purpose at all' (Bennett 1987, 210). Across decades of film and television from both the UK and USA, such 'safe' stereotypes certainly predominate. The majority of ghosts in popular culture continue to be easily 'managed', whether caught in traps (*Ghostbusters,* 1984, 2016), exorcised, made friendly (*Casper the Friendly Ghost*, 1939[12], 1995; Dennis in *Angel*, 1999; Annie in *Being Human*, 2008), unmasked as regular human villains (*Scooby Doo*, 1969 onward) or presented as a 'presence' suggested by the slightest noises, barely caught on camera (*Most Haunted,* 2002 onward). With such synthetic, relatively harmless, or dubious representations, these ghosts are hardly the dreaded, malevolent, Jamesian spirits that might keep us awake in our beds at night.

While this is clearly true of the pop-culture examples Bennett describes, consideration of the unique context of 1970s television, when the media were willing to

treat the supernatural as more serious subject matter, subverts this tradition. I propose that wyrd television goes well beyond this two-dimensional safe representation of the supernatural. British folk horror avoids such easy categorization and cartoonish outlines; there are no straightforward explanations for these folkloric spirits. Even educated professors of science such as Reverend Somerton in 1970s wyrd television are left unable to debunk or explain away supernatural events, rendered weak and frightened by experiences they are forced to consider as real. The earnest application of supernatural tropes by programme-makers to unsettle viewers, with encouragement of them to question the realms of possibility, epitomises the enduring impact of wyrd television of the 1970s. The sincerity and plausibility with which the subject matter is treated and presented, alongside a complete lack of cartoonish unmasking, or any neat proof, clarity of definition, or containment of supernatural threats, means that the possibility of belief spills beyond the confines of the programme itself. If current directors are elaborating upon 1970s television representations of folklore to create their own representations of folkloric motifs, then those motifs are not only perpetuated in themselves, but are also shaped by the ways in which television technique is employed to represent them. The eeriness which persists throughout wyrd television can be defined in part by style and technique, but much more as a combination with the venerative inclusion of folklore. Though not necessarily such dedicated folklorists as M. R. James, the post-2000 folk horror revivalists are keen students of the work of their 1970s predecessors, to which they closely adhere in their own creation of wyrd television. In doing so, this lineage of British television and filmmakers continues to reproduce the enduring effects of the expression of folkloric motifs in television and popular culture.

Acknowledgements

Notes

[1] While it is difficult to find accurate data on cinema attendance in the 1970s, TV audience figures would be vastly in excess of those for the cinema and a one-time television broadcast would have achieved a more concentrated impact than a theatrical release. For example, the BBC reported that at the end of 1972, the original broadcast of 'A Warning to the Curious', an episode of the BBC's *Ghost Stories for Christmas*, reached 14.4 per cent of the UK population, which would have totalled over eight million people at the time (BBC Written Archives 1973).

[2] Best outlined by Mark Fisher (2014).

[3] Post-2000 'folk-horror revivalists' who regularly use 'wyrd' themes in their work include, amongst others: Mark Gatiss (*The League of Gentlemen*, TV, 1999 – 2002; 'The Tractate Middoth', TV, 2013); Jeremy Dyson (*The League of Gentlemen*; *Ghost Stories*, film, 2018); Reece Shearsmith (*The League of Gentlemen*; *Inside No. 9*, TV, 2014 –); Ben Wheatley (*Kill List*, film, 2011; *A Field in England*, film, 2013); Richard Littler (*Scarfolk*, blog, 2014); and Jim Jupp (Ghost Box Records, founded 2004). My research to date has included collection of the stories of, and folkloric influences upon, a number of the above via first-hand interviews.

[4] At the centre of Frazer's ideas was the notion of a sacred king—a human sacrifice offered back to the earth to rejuvenate the land and make way for a new king. This helped to popularize the idea of witchcraft as a 'pagan survival', an equally discredited thesis, developed from Frazer's work by Margaret Murray.

[5] BBC Written Archives 1970.

[6] However, due to the regional structure of ITV, some viewers in borderline areas could receive more than one ITV station and, therefore, sometimes different programmes.

[7] With almost two thirds of the total television audience (BBC Written Archives 1975; Office for National Statistics 2018), the ghost story was the favourite choice of viewers willing to stay up past midnight: BBC Two was simultaneously offering festive *Christmas Music from Hampton Court*, while ITV Thames broadcast the 1969 comedy film *The Best House in London*. Of the twelve regional variations from Thames, a quarter were broadcasting news or sports updates at this time while half were broadcasting films (including comedy, drama, and horror). All of these films began at 10:30 pm or thereabouts, well before 'Abbot Thomas'. Although a film in this slot must have had wide appeal for those willing to stay up late, it is plausible that many viewers had already watched a film that evening (*The Graduate*, 1967, was on BBC One from 9:20 pm – 11:05 pm). Alternatively, some viewers of the later ITV films may have turned over to the BBC out of curiosity, halfway through the film or during an advertising break, and decided to stick with the intriguing ghostly fare.

[8] 'The Tractate Middoth' was rated seventeenth overall in terms of viewing figures for all programmes on BBC Two that week (week ending 29 December 2013). Although in a favourable timeslot, it was broadcast in competition with *Mrs Brown's Boys Christmas Special* on BBC One and the *Downton Abbey Christmas Special* on ITV (which gained 11.52 million and 7.75 million viewers, respectively). Thirty-six per cent of the UK population was watching one of the main five channels at the time of broadcast—this figure is of course inflated when taking into account additional digital channels (BARB 2018).

[9] For example, *The Radio Times* had average weekly sales of 8.8 million in 1955 and, in 1988, gained a place in the *Guinness Book of Records* when the Christmas edition sold over eleven million copies, making it the biggest selling edition of any British magazine in history ('The Radio Times', *History of the BBC*, 2018, http://www.bbc.co.uk/historyofthebbc/research/general/radio-times). The most recent figures published by the Audit Bureau of Circulations for the latter part of 2017 show the magazine's reach being greatly reduced at an average of 631,960 weekly copies (Audit Bureau of Circulations, 'Radio Times July to December 2017 - Certificate issued 15 Feb 2018', https://www.abc.org.uk/Certificates/48751023.pdf). There is now, of course, online content about television programming, but this is still consumed in a much less concentrated way than in the 1970s.

[10] Originally published in 1904 and 1911, respectively.

[11] 'The Treasure of Abbot Thomas' is set in the nineteenth century and against the backdrop of a medieval abbey, filmed at Wells Cathedral and Library in Somerset, while scenes of 'The Tractate Middoth' (although set in the 1950s) are set and filmed in Chetham's Library in Manchester, believed to be the oldest public library in England, founded in 1653.

[12] The character Casper the Friendly Ghost appeared in children's books and comics onward from 1939 and 1949, respectively, and in animated cartoons from 1945 onward.

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