

## **Ghosts in the Machine: Haunted Screens**

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SLIDE 1

Television programmes with supernatural themes have often spooked the nation and, on occasion, fooled viewers into thinking what they were watching was real.

SLIDE 2

On Hallowe'en in 1992, the BBC broadcast *Ghostwatch* which, presented in the guise of live television, became infamous as one of the most complained-about television programmes of all time. It terrified audiences when a supposedly real live ghost investigation, (and the programme itself!) seemed to become possessed. It was an example of a writer - Stephen Volk - testing the credulity of TV audiences by featuring a number of techniques to blur the boundary between fact and fiction to spook viewers.

SLIDE 3

A ninety- minute television play, *Ghostwatch* was presented on BBC One at Halloween as a piece of reality television investigating supernatural activities in the house of a single mother and her two young daughters. The TV Times pictured here describes it as a drama, made in mock-documentary style and mentions it's Michael Parkinson's first acting role. *Radio Times* too described it as "A Screen One Special drama for Hallowe'en ... BBC TV turns the cameras on ghoulies, ghosties and things that go bump in the night." Promising spooks from the outset, with quite a light-hearted tone and the listing even gives the actors names playing the characters, for example Pamela Early was played by Brid Brennan, who has since been in *Peaky Blinders* amongst other things.

SLIDE 4

This mockumentary style included using real-life BBC presenters like children's TV presenters Sarah Greene and Mike Smith, Craig Charles, the whole thing shot documentary-style, outside broadcast vans...and the authority of chat-show stalwart Michael Parkinson based in the studio, all of whom were familiar to and trusted by viewers at the time: "many viewers believed the show was real simply because Parkinson was presenting it" (ibid., p. 58). So even though it was billed as a drama, but many of the 11 million viewers were taken in by a "live" investigation into paranormal activity being recorded at a family home in Northolt, London.

SLIDE 5

With similarities to the story of the Enfield poltergeist (1977) broadcast widely on British teatime news in 1977 and across print media, The presenters of *Ghostwatch* are based in a London council house, at which poltergeist activity is supposed to have taken place by the presence of a spirit known as 'Pipes', and carrying out an on-air investigation...

SLIDE 6

*Ghostwatch*, "employed all the visual language, presentation and techniques of a live broadcast show in a convincing way" (Kerekes, 2003, p. 58) -note this is a decade before *Most Haunted* began. The presenters themselves don't appear to be taking the story seriously, and even play Halloween pranks on each other at the start (Craig Charles hides in a pantry, makes banging noises, and then jumps out wearing a rubber mask).

SLIDE 7

The tension mounts however as we learn about this 'Pipes' spirit (supposedly of a psychologically disturbed man) and unsettling events manifest onscreen, such as causing the children to manically recite nursery rhymes and scratches appear on one of the children's faces. Basically, we're

witnessing this family be subjected to increasingly terrifying experiences as the spirit of a dead man appeared to possessed the children.

#### SLIDE 8

Viewers are asked to telephone the studio with their own ghost stories and supernatural experiences, which becomes an important plot point: viewers were encouraged to call in to the show and share their stories of violent occurrences, and there's an increase in calls about poltergeist activity across the country, other people saying they've seen 'Pipes'. So there are elements built in to disarm cynical viewers immediately and make the audience feel directly involved. Interestingly, the phone number given out was real, but the 'callers' heard in the drama were actors – the voice of one caller is actually that of director Lesley Manning. Real viewers who did get through on the telephone were told that the programme was a work of fiction (Kerekes, 2003, p. 58).

#### SLIDE 9

An "expert" in the studio with Michael Parkinson suggests that the show has been acting as a sort of national séance. In a dizzying climax, Pipes appeared to take control of the BBC studios and possess Parkinson. Left the audience thinking that the programme itself and maybe even your television too had become possessed, a ghost in the machine!

#### SLIDE 10

The apparently live broadcast in fact took six weeks to complete production and, due to its convincing nature, received an unprecedented reaction from viewers, with an estimated 20,000 callers ringing the BBC during the climax of the show, with "over 100,000 calls to the BBC about the show in total" (ibid., p. 59). Despite the BBC billing *Ghostwatch* as a drama and the late transmission time of 9:25pm, well after the watershed, parents and viewers were outraged, even calling Scotland Yard and Northholt police about the alleged events in the programme, claiming that their children were too scared to sleep: "'My kids were terrified!' commented Mrs Valerie McVey in the *News of the World*" (ibid., p. 60).

#### SLIDE 11

A tragic event linked with the programme, fuelling a media attack with headlines including "This TV Programme Killed Our Dear Son" (*The Mail on Sunday*, in Kerekes, 2003, p. 60), was the suicide of one teenage viewer, Martin Denham, an 18-year-old with learning difficulties, who hanged himself from a tree near his Nottingham home five days after watching the programme. Denham's parents complained to the Broadcasting Standards Commission, arguing *Ghostwatch* caused their son's death but, although "a coroner made no reference to the programme when he announced his verdict that Denham had taken his own life".

The Broadcasting Standards Commission (now OFCOM) ruled that the BBC "had a duty to do more than simply hint at the deception it was practising on the audience. In *Ghostwatch* there was a deliberate attempt to cultivate a sense of menace" (Frean, 1995, p. 12). A study in the [\*British Medical Journal\*](#) later reported several cases of post-traumatic stress in children who had watched the programme (O'Connor, 2017).

#### SLIDE 12

In fact, Ofcom state Rule 1.27 of the Broadcasting Standards Code: "Demonstrations of exorcisms, occult practices and the paranormal (which purport to be real), must not be shown before the watershed (in the case of television) or when children are particularly likely to be listening (in the

case of radio). Paranormal practices [such as possessions and seances] which are for entertainment purposes must not be broadcast when significant numbers of children may be expected to be watching, or are particularly likely to be listening.” Ofcom also say: “ensuring that it is clear to viewers whether or not a programme is intended for entertainment purposes can be a fine judgement... it must be made clear to viewers”

#### SLIDE 13

Interesting to take into account with 2018's Halloween *Inside No. 9* special 'Dead Line', It is extremely likely that writers Shearsmith and Pemberton would have been familiar with the history and methods of *Ghostwatch* when planning their own misleading tactics. *Dead Line* was billed and presented as a live broadcast (Sun 28 Oct 2018) started as a another typical episode in the fictional drama series, but less than five minutes in the sound dropped, the continuity apologised for the problem, and then we cut to actors apparently waiting on set, confused about whether they were on TV or not.

#### SLIDE 14

These mysterious disruptions and technical glitches, led to the broadcasting of live CCTV footage from the dressing room and the stars Reece Shearsmith and Steve Pemberton took to Twitter to check what was going on. When their long term collaborator Mark Gatiss was one of the first to tweet them back in real-time, it helped to persuade the viewer of the 'reality' of events. Viewers believed they were witnessing a genuine disruption to the TV show, some interacting in real-time with the actors live on Twitter, or even switching channels and missing the ending. For those who carried on watching, the broadcast itself, like *Ghostwatch*, seemed to become possessed by malevolent forces.

Some people were convinced again that there was another Ghost in the Machine! I look forward to whatever the next one may be!