

**Ghosts in the Machine. Folklore and Technology On-screen in Ghostwatch (1992) and Host (2020)**

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## Ghosts in the Machine: Folklore and technology onscreen in *Ghostwatch* (1992) and *Host* (2020)

By Diane A. Rodgers

It has been well established that folklore is an integral element of folk horror (Rodgers, 2019, Cowdell, 2019): film and television with supernatural themes often feature the performance of folklore in order to accentuate the plausibility of fictional tales in order to spook audiences. When folklore is enacted or represented onscreen in this way, it can be examined via the lens of the folklore studies concept of mass-mediated ostension. Developed by Mikel J. Koven (2007), mass-mediated ostension draws from folklorists Linda Dégh and Andrew Vásonyi's notion of ostensive action (1983) which describes behaviour based on, or influenced by, folklore and legend which, in turn, can create or perpetuate folklore. Koven thus uses the phrase 'mass-mediated ostension' to describe the showing or acting out of folkloric narratives in the mass media to suggest that the narrative dramatisation of a legend, or the presentation of folklore within onscreen action, is a kind of ostension in itself.

In some cases of unsettling examples of film and television, viewers have been fooled into thinking what they were watching was real, giving media the potential to perpetuate popularly held folkloric beliefs. The use of technology has successfully been brought into play on a number of occasions to combine notions of the ancient and the modern and accentuate the illusion of verisimilitude. For example, *Ghostwatch* (1992) played with the medium of television itself in order to test the credulity of audiences, featuring a number of visual techniques and use of communications technology to blur boundaries between fact and fiction. More recently, in an era where Covid-19 has shaped every aspect of daily life, folkloric horror has embraced further technological changes in a context of increasingly heavy reliance on digital media and video-calling technology which has also seen many customs and rituals moving online. New technology has often acted in horror as “a metaphor for something yet able to be understood” (Ferguson, 2015, p. 123) and the 2020 British horror film *Host* dealt with this idea head-on, in which a group of young people meet in a Zoom chat during lockdown to hold a séance online.

This chapter will, therefore, examine *Ghostwatch* and *Host* in terms of their place in a lineage of folk horror film and television playing with the format of technology itself to present plausible contexts for supernatural narratives. Whether audiences *literally* believe in ghosts or not is less important than the fact that these examples encourage audiences to at least *entertain* the possibility of the supernatural and, therefore, have the potential to affect popularly held notions, folkloric beliefs or, in some cases, social behaviour. Mass-mediated ostension “implicitly recognises an audience by encouraging some form of post-presentation debate regarding the veracity of the legends presented... Whether ...believed or not, such veracity is secondary to the discussion of their possibility” (Koven, 2007, p.185). Therefore, a folklore studies approach allows examination of *how* folklore and contemporary legend is communicated and reinterpreted, whilst recognising the importance of the part played by film, television and communications technology in the evolution and adaptation of the folklore and culture which it represents.

### ***Ghostwatch***

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 broadcast technology itself at one stage, seemed to become possessed. Writer Stephen Volk created the ninety-minute television play for BBC One, to be broadcast on Hallowe'en as if it were a piece of reality television investigating supernatural activities in the house of a single mother and her two young daughters. However, publicity at the time of broadcast did not conceal the fictitious nature of the drama. The *TV Times* describes *Ghostwatch* as a "spine-tingling, ghostly drama", mentions that it is a "frighteningly true-to-life reconstruction" in which "actors play the parts of the family" and explicitly states it is made in "mock documentary style" (*TV Times*, 1992, p.6). The *Radio Times* described *Ghostwatch* 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." Although both articles promise spooks and scares from the outset, both are light-hearted in tone and provide a cast list of the actors playing the fictional characters (such as Brid Brennan who played the mother Pamela Early, known more recently on television for her role in *Peaky Blinders*, 2016-17).

This mockumentary approach plausibly created the context of a live broadcast, with hand-held cameras shooting documentary-style against a backdrop of BBC outside broadcast vans. *Ghostwatch* was hosted by real-life BBC presenters like Sarah Greene, Mike Smith and Craig Charles, who were all familiar on children's television at the time and the credibility of the programme was bolstered further by the authority of chat-show stalwart Michael Parkinson. Parkinson was based in the studio, familiar to and trusted by viewers of all ages at the time: "many viewers believed the show was real simply because Parkinson was presenting it" (Kerekes, 2003, p. 58). Despite the fact that the broadcast was evidently billed as a drama, many of the eleven million viewers were nonetheless fooled into thinking that what they were seeing was a "live" investigation into paranormal activity being recorded at a family home in Northolt, London.

The premise of *Ghostwatch* shares many similarities with (and was directly based on) the Enfield poltergeist, a real-life case of a supposed haunting which was broadcast widely as a news story in 1977 on British television and across print media. The Enfield story centred around apparent poltergeist activity in a north London council house inhabited by Peggy Hodgson, a single mother of two girls Margaret and Janet, respectively aged 13 and 11 at the time. Similarly, in *Ghostwatch*, Pamela Early is a single mother of two girls, Suzanne and Kim, of comparable ages to the Enfield girls, living in a fictional west London council house. The Enfield story, though prevalent over a decade earlier, was firmly rooted in the public consciousness (decades on, the story persists in popular culture such as in the 2015 television series *The Enfield Haunting*, and 2016 feature film *The Conjuring 2*), which played a significant role in helping to blur the notion of fact and fiction.

*Ghostwatch's* on-air investigation of the presence of a spirit known as 'Pipes' innovatively "employed all the visual language, presentation and techniques of a live broadcast show in a convincing way" (Kerekes, 2003, p. 58), a decade before well-known ghost-hunting 'reality' shows like *Most Haunted* (2002-present) began. The audience are often misdirected, with the programme suggesting that this is just a bit of light-hearted live-TV-event fun as the presenters themselves don't initially appear to be taking the idea of a haunting seriously. They even play jovial Halloween pranks on each other: Craig Charles hides in a pantry making banging noises, then jumps out wearing a rubber mask to startle his colleagues and get a laugh. The tension mounts however as we learn about the spirit named 'Pipes', who it is revealed in life was a psychologically disturbed man, and unsettling events begin to manifest onscreen. We see the children suddenly and manically recite nursery rhymes evidently under the influence of the spirit, and Suzanne is attacked by an unseen force, leaving her covered in scratch marks. The tone of the programme shifts dramatically from

light-hearted family entertainment to what seems, essentially, the witnessing of a family repeatedly subjected to terrifying experiences as the spirit of a dead man possesses the children.

As events take these disturbing turns, the format cleverly draws the audience further into the illusion of direct engagement with the programme, using the façade of a phone line open to the public for the duration of the broadcast. Viewers are invited to telephone the studio with their own ghost stories and supernatural experiences, which becomes an important plot point: there is apparently an increase in calls about poltergeist activity and violent supernatural occurrences from across the UK, with some people even reporting that they've seen 'Pipes'. The phone number given out was real, and would have been familiar to some viewers as the regular phone number (081 811 8181) used every Saturday morning on the children's BBC show *Going Live!* (1987-1993). Although the *Ghostwatch* phone lines were manned by volunteers, "who explained that the show was a fiction" to successful callers (Newman, 2006), the line was besieged by so many trying to get through that most would have simply got an engaged tone. This, combined with the fact that 'callers' were heard on air as part of the drama (all of whom were actors, with the voice of one caller actually that of director Lesley Manning) would have increased the sense of verisimilitude for the audience, with elements like this built in to disarm cynical viewers and increase the sense of audience involvement. Gillian Bevan plays Dr. Lin Pascoe, a paranormal 'expert' joining Michael Parkinson in the studio (adding another dimension of sincerity to proceedings), who suggests that the broadcast has been acting as a sort of national séance and that television itself has been playing the role of a literal 'medium', "supposedly spreading the poltergeist phenomena into the homes of the viewing public" (ibid.). In a dizzying climax, Pipes appears to take control of the BBC studios and even possesses Parkinson himself, leaving the audience with the suggestion that not only the programme itself but also the technology and their own television had become possessed, with a ghost literally invading the machine.

### ***Ghostwatch*: the aftermath**

It is debatable, however, to what degree *Ghostwatch* was intended to be presented by the BBC as 'real' given the fictional billing and the fact that the apparently 'live broadcast' took six weeks to complete production. However, due to its convincing nature, *Ghostwatch* 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" (Kerekes, 2003, p. 59). Writer Stephen Volk had wanted to go further in the ambiguous framing of the programme, not wanting his name to appear on the programme credits and railing against the suggestion that an onscreen message should have been displayed to inform viewers that this was a fictional account:

If we'd had a screaming banner across the screen reading "This is not true", what is the point of that? You might as well have a comedian give you the punchline before he tells you the gag. The BBC insisted on certain billing compromises in the Radio Times such as a cast list (that almost had me slitting my wrists!) and a lot of the magazine coverage pretty much gave the game away. What do you do? Destroy the fun of the programme for the people who might enjoy it, for the sake of pleasing those who might be offended, who probably won't like it anyway? The BBC's answer to that would be YES! My answer would be NO. (Volk, in Newman, 2006).

Despite the BBC insisting the writer's name appear on the opening titles, clearly billing *Ghostwatch* in listings as a drama, and the late transmission time of 9:25pm (well after the watershed), parents and viewers were outraged regardless. Some parents went to the extreme of calling Scotland Yard

and Northolt 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" (Kerekes, 2003, p.60). A tragic event linked with the programme, fuelling a media attack with headlines like "This TV Programme Killed Our Dear Son" in *The Mail on Sunday* (Chapman, 1992) 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 *The Times* stated that "a coroner made no reference to the programme when he announced his verdict that Denham had taken his own life" (Frean, 1995, p.12). Nonetheless, 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" and patently stated that "In *Ghostwatch* there was a deliberate attempt to cultivate a sense of menace" (ibid.). 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).

Ofcom's Broadcasting Standards Code (established in 2003) states that if demonstrations of the paranormal are intended "for entertainment purposes, this must be made clear to viewers" (Ofcom, 2021a), with rule 1.27 demanding that

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 content is likely to be accessed by children... Paranormal practices which are for entertainment purposes must not be broadcast when significant numbers of children may be expected to be watching (Ofcom, 2021b)

It is interesting, therefore, to briefly take into account 2018's *Inside No. 9* Halloween special 'Dead Line' for which 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', broadcast at 10pm on Sunday 28 Oct 2018, was billed and presented as a "special live edition for Halloween" (TRILT, 2018). The description in the listing suggested a story outline typical of other episodes in the fictional drama series, other than that this was a special live event. However, less than five minutes in to the broadcast, the sound dropped out, the continuity announcer apologised for the problem, and the programme cut to actors apparently waiting on set behind the scenes, confused about whether they were on television or not. The story billed, about a man who "finds an old mobile phone in his local graveyard" (ibid.), impishly suggestive of haunted technology, is abandoned due to continued technical glitches and mysterious disruptions, which lead to the apparent broadcasting of live CCTV footage from the actors' dressing room. Star Reece Shearsmith takes to Twitter to check what is happening, tweeting "Are me and Steve Pemberton on BBC two now?" When their long term collaborator Mark Gatiss is one of the first to tweet his reply "YES!!" in real-time, it helped to persuade viewers of the 'reality' of events. Viewers believed they were witnessing a genuine disruption to the TV show, some continuing to interact in real-time 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.

## **A post-2020 context: Covid-19 and *Host***

In his discussion of *Most Haunted*, Mikel Koven argues that the televisual framing of programmes like this is largely what causes the audience to contemplate the "possibility that the phenomenon was real, even if entertained momentarily" (2007, p. 194). If we extend this framing to include the use of interactive phone-in and social media elements in *Ghostwatch* and 'Dead Line' this raises

further questions about "the role that television programmes about the supernatural play as legend-tellers" and their effect upon an audience (ibid., p. 183). This discussion can be similarly applied to *Host* which, though a streaming film rather than broadcast television, utilises the internet video-calling platform Zoom as a most appropriate form of technology to encapsulate the Covid-19 era. The technological format of a Zoom call itself brings an additional level of unsettling eeriness to the film, acting as a metaphor for the background presence of coronavirus, lockdown isolation and is made to look as realistic as possible (including the unconventionally short length of the film which, at fifty-six minutes, is closer to the length of a free Zoom call than a typical feature presentation).

Even when audiences may not literally believe in the supernatural, or in narratives as presented on screen, it is beyond doubt that drama has the power to influence actions and behaviour. For example, in February 2021, then British Secretary of State for Health Matt Hancock revealed that his strategy and policy for the UK's coronavirus vaccination programme was partly shaped by the Hollywood film *Contagion* (2011) which Hancock stated "influenced the government's approach" (Forrest, 2021). Though Hancock also stated that he "wouldn't say that that film was my primary source of advice" (ibid.), it is worth pointing out that a month before he resigned, he was vociferously denounced by former chief ministerial adviser Dominic Cummings for "lying to everybody on multiple occasions" (Allegretti, 2021). Cummings himself, in court testimony about Government mishandling of the pandemic, went on to directly compare Boris Johnson to the Mayor who bullishly kept the beaches open in the film *Jaws* (1975) and aligned himself with Jeff Goldblum's character in the alien invasion film *Independence Day* (1996), who is the only one to understand the gravity of the impending threat. It is interesting, therefore, in a lineage of media presenting folkloric tropes in a plausible context (with the possibility of influence upon an audience), to examine how Covid related circumstances are shaping the way we use technology and how this in turn is communicated back to us in film and television.

Dominating the video-calling market from an early stage in the pandemic as "the second most downloaded app in the world" (Jain, 2020), Zoom quickly became a familiar format to many people needing to work from home. Aside from a means to carry on meetings and contact with friends, however, video conferencing technology also became a way to move folkloric customs and rituals online, whether calendar customs, celebratory events or sadly, out of necessity, funeral and memorial services. Video calls have thus naturally developed their own rules, rituals and etiquette: it has become habit for participants to mute themselves when not speaking, and even habitually wave goodbye at the end of a session, something rarely done in face to face meetings (a gesture that in itself reinforces physical distance). Alongside these human actions, regular technological glitches have become familiar, whether people mouthing voicelessly (having forgotten to unmute themselves), buffering video freezing people into juddering ghostly sounds and movements, or even wifi dropout causing people to mysteriously disappear from sessions altogether.

These features quickly became recognisable to the extent to which prolific internet memes liken videocall practices to a séance or seance-like ritual. Zoom participants are often faced with black screens, prompting them to ask "Is anybody there?" and a Zoom meeting host simultaneously alludes to 'host' in the folkloric sense as ghostly or supernatural vessel. In Gaelic folklore, for example, for example, a "fairy host, was regarded as composed of the souls of the dead flying through the air" (Spence, 1999, p.88). *Host* combines these notions in its narrative which presents a group of young people meet in a Zoom chat during lockdown to hold a séance online. Filmed while lockdown restrictions were in place, the actors in *Host* had to set up their own cameras, lighting, stunts and special effects to a large extent. One of the advantages of presenting a Zoom-based narrative is that characters can realistically access it on mobile devices, allowing them to pick up

their laptop or phone and effectively film mobile or point-of-view shots, putting the audience directly into the action. Keeping the onscreen furniture of Zoom visible throughout, and multiple camera views at most times, however, maintains the illusion of a realistic, continuous videocall.

When we are introduced to the participating characters, there is some fairly inane chatter as they greet and catch up with one another in a convivial, relaxed atmosphere. This relaxed group chat, however, is peppered from the outset with moments of unstable wifi, audio feedback, participants freeze framing and dropping in and out, all of which are likely to occur in a 'real' Zoom call. This framework of technological characteristics simultaneously settles the audience into a familiar context but also an unstable pattern which keeps the viewer on edge in terms of expectations: we are led to wonder what element, whose camera or sound may cut out next, when it may happen and why. The filmmakers mischievously make knowing fun of the production process in this respect and play with audience expectations overtly. Viewers are most likely aware that they are watching a horror film (*Host* was released on Shudder, a dedicated online horror streaming service) and elements of classic horror iconography are introduced early on both as narrative misdirection and a nod to more typical examples of the genre. For example, Teddy, one of the group's friends joins the call for a while and shows to the camera some weird antiques around his house which include the classic horror tropes of a creepy ventriloquist's dummy and an antique musical box which plays a spooky tune.

The audience only realise this online get together has been specifically arranged to hold a group séance when a medium called Seylan is introduced into the call. A séance is a ritual we more traditionally see portrayed onscreen with a circle of people together around a table, most often physically touching with fingers or hands, so here the format again reminds us about Coronavirus and the need for physical separation and isolation. The performance style is very naturalistic: the medium Seylan is not made to act stereotypically in an overly dramatic, wacky or eccentric manner, but is presented as a maternal, down to earth and softly spoken Scots woman. The acting style is so plausible it is easy to forget at times that this is not a real zoom call, perhaps emphasised by the fact that the group of friends in the film use their own real-life names onscreen (as do all the actors). What is particularly interesting here in terms of mass-mediated ostension, is that we see the entire séance ritual conducted onscreen; the lead up to and the aftermath, all carried out in real time and a plausible context. Seylan leads the friends through the ritual, explaining the process, what to visualise, how to encourage or sever connections with the spirit world, and guides the participants in lighting candles. For viewers watching the film on a device where they may normally participate in Zoom meetings or sessions of any kind, moments like these are virtually indiscernible from a real Zoom call: any audience member could participate in the ritual and follow Seylan's simple instructions.

The Zoom format heightens many spooky elements of the ritual in terms of cinematography: candles provide classic horror underlighting effects and low bandwidth and supposed connection issues cause all sorts of visual blurring and tricks of the light. Even for those who might already be familiar with the format of video calls, and for those of us already familiar with the conventions of supernatural horror, these are uniquely shifted into a Covid-era context. For example, offscreen sound can be used inventively: a mysterious sound could be something brushing or catching a participant's microphone, it could be a technical or wifi glitch or could in fact indicate that there is a ghost in the machine. At one point when Seylan is explaining the ritual procedure, a sudden loud banging sound causes participants to jump, upon which the medium dashes away from her laptop apologising because her supermarket shopping delivery has arrived. There is a bittersweet comedic

relief in this moment, a misdirection peculiar to the Covid-context playing on the huge increase in people ordering groceries online in order to isolate or maintain social distancing.

The group of friends largely make light of the séance process until Seylan's camera suddenly cuts out and, not long afterward, one character is violently dragged backward from her laptop and away from the camera by her chair. Events escalate quickly as the girls variously investigate noises and movement in their homes, accentuating the sense of isolation but, for those that have yet to watch *Host*, I will refrain from further spoilers here. Most of what is described above takes place in the first twenty minute of the film, but it is worth mentioning there are some very impressive effects and technical stunts given the circumstances under which the film was made. There are significant moments during the call when the group can only watch each other helplessly via Zoom, often leaning into their cameras with looks of terror or with tears in their eyes which creates a series of simultaneous close-ups onscreen reminiscent of iconic shots from *The Blair Witch Project* (1999). *Blair Witch* is a film emulating found footage from a legend tripping investigation into a witch's curse and was itself pioneering in terms of low budget horror. Similarly to *Host*, *Blair Witch* presented a plausibly historical legend in a realistic context of an amateur-investigation using modern digital camera technology of the day to create what became iconographic (and much parodied) 'selfie' shots.

*Host*, therefore, fits into a lineage of film and television using the format of technology itself to plausibly present the notion of malignant entities exploiting technology to achieve their ends. The idea that spirits can somehow invade our screens and our homes within, or even *because of*, their onscreen representation has caused at least some audience members to think what they were seeing was real. Unique to *Host*, however, is that it was made early in the Covid-era when video calling was becoming familiar to many but not yet comfortable routine, still part of a strange new Covid-affected world. Zoom was for some an unsettling framework to grapple in its own right and, with its own customs (or at least etiquette), it presents a ritual within a ritual; a séance embedded within a Zoom call. In a folkloric context the performance of the tradition or ritual séance, and the use of the Zoom format are fascinating in terms of how they may shape the evolution of such customs in the future, and their representations onscreen.

Some customs, shifted online out of necessity (such as memorial services), may well remain online to an extent due to the geographical distance between modern families or accessibility issues for some. The combination of technology and folklore in dramatic narratives, particularly alongside supernatural themes, is a natural juxtaposition of the modern and the ancient. A delicious notion behind folk horror is that, however a ghostly narrative is framed by the (apparent) spectacle of live television, bouncy presenters and fun phone-ins as in *Ghostwatch*, or by cynical millennials using technology for a Friday night diversion in *Host*, ancient or supernatural threats are still lurking and can not only 'get through' despite the modernity of the technology but, often *because of* it. These onscreen representations, however, update and alter how we understand and relate to folklore, which itself evolves and adapts it alongside the technology by which it is framed. Though *Host* was made almost thirty years after *Ghostwatch*, the dramatic essence of the story is the same, with the addition of Zoom to this canon reminding audiences that no modern format is 'safe', and invites us to at least entertain the possibility that spirits could somehow reach us from beyond.

Despite having never been repeated on British television (though it has appeared on international stations and was released in 2002 on DVD), *Ghostwatch* still remains in squarely in the public consciousness. In 2021, BBC Radio Four podcast series *The Battersea Poltergeist* combined drama, documentary and studio discussion to examine the real life peculiar events of a paranormal case which began in the mid-1950s. At the centre of the investigation was Shirley Hitchens, then



aged 15, her family and their terraced home in south-west London. The series was presented by Danny Robins who, during some episodes, invited audience engagement including live 'listen-alongs' and asked listeners to share their own spooky experiences. However, by the end of the series, one recurring theory from listeners was one which Robins said he "never in a million years would have seen coming" (Robins, 2021), stating that:

There were some people who were utterly convinced that I was making the entire thing up and that Shirley was an actress... the example that they cited to back up this theory was *Ghostwatch* (ibid.).

In a sense, the podcast series became an unwitting extension of the mass-mediated ostension triggered by *Ghostwatch*, decades after its original broadcast. Robins states that because of *Ghostwatch* many listeners "just refuse to believe that Battersea Poltergeist [the story itself rather than necessarily the haunting] was real" and asks Sarah Greene, original *Ghostwatch* presenter (and self-confessed fan of *The Battersea Poltergeist* series), if she is surprised by the enduring power of the programme. Greene, noting that *Ghostwatch* continues to find fans who weren't even born in 1992, responds with an interesting counterpoint: that many people "still refuse to believe that *Ghostwatch* wasn't real, they want to believe it happened. They cannot accept that this was a carefully written, directed and shot piece of drama" (ibid.). Therefore, the power of folklore onscreen should not be underestimated: the narrative, dramatic and technological frameworks within folkloric tropes are presented can entirely affect audience perception and understanding, in some cases for generations to come. It remains an important job of folk horror, folklore and contemporary legend studies to observe what folklore is presented to us and how it is framed in mass media. This not only helps us to reflect upon why we do things and how we do them (customs, rituals and beliefs) but also but also our own media usage in relation to folklore and how this, in turn, shapes the narratives, practices and rituals that continue to surround our daily lives.

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