

## **‘Broadcasting, Horror and Children: the case of *Ghostwatch* (BBC, 1992)’**

Paper delivered by **James Zborowski** at *Childhood and the Media*, IAMHIST conference,

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I’d like to begin by quickly acknowledging that this presentation is a spin-off from an as-yet-unpublished article that I co-authored with a colleague and friend, Dr Tom Steward, an independent scholar based in the USA.

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The television text that I’m talking about today is *Ghostwatch*, produced by the BBC and broadcast for the first and only time on Halloween of 1992, on BBC1, comfortably after the 9pm watershed.

**[Ask for a show of hands to ascertain how many people have seen programme.]**

I thought it’d be a shame to talk about such a great programme and not show a clip from it, so here’s a brief extract, which I’ll gloss a little after we’ve seen it.

**[Show clip - timecode 56.30-58.00 on 101 Films DVD when played on VLC.]**

So, a little flavour of the programme for those who haven’t seen it and little reminder for those who have. As is clear from that extract, *Ghostwatch* adopts the rhetoric of factual programming. At the time, it was compared more specifically to *Crimewatch UK*, as that programme was called then. However, whilst *Ghostwatch* simulates factual programming and outside broadcasting throughout, it is in fact, fiction. As the programme proceeds, events take several turns for the worse, and by

the end of the show a paedophilic poltergeist 'Pipes' has possessed one of the teenage girls we just saw, and perhaps even the sceptical, reliable Michael Parkinson himself. Not only this, the parapsychological 'expert' on the programme, Dr Lin Pascoe, played by Gillian Bevan, suggests that the broadcasting event has created a mass séance - that Pipes has been piped into homes across the nation!

Which leads to the second important point about *Ghostwatch*. This prerecorded drama not only pretended to be factual, it pretended to be *live*. The presenters address the viewer directly, and use the present and future tense. As the show unfolds, the presenters in the studio are frequently 'interrupted' as things heat up at the outside broadcast location. A phone number is flashed up on screen throughout the programme, and we see and hear calls, ostensibly from members of the viewing public, being taken by the presenters.

Meanwhile, out in the real world on Halloween 1992, real viewers were jamming the switchboards. On the BBC's right-to-reply programme *Biteback* the following month, which we'll be seeing a bit of shortly, we hear from the producer Ruth Baumgarten that at one point over twenty thousand people were trying to get through to the *five* operators who had been put in place to reassure anxious callers that what they were watching was indeed a fiction.

*Ghostwatch* caused controversy. There were many complaints. There were newspaper reports of pregnant viewers going into early labour. In one particularly sad story, an intellectually impaired eighteen year old reportedly became obsessed with the programme and committed suicide five days after watching it. The Broadcasting Standards Council eventually censured the BBC. I'll be going into the details of this censure later.

So much by way of context then. Having addressed the question ‘What is *Ghostwatch*?’, I want to explain why I’m talking about this programme at a conference about children and media.

Firstly, *Ghostwatch* has children in it. Two of them in main roles, as members of the Early family, and several others seen or mentioned more briefly throughout the programme. My initial plan when pitching this paper was to speak in more detail than I am going to about this aspect of the programme. For those of you who can read fast, I was going to use the quotation that you can now see on the screen, which is taken from Jeffrey Sconce’s magisterial book *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television*. The scenario of spiritualist rapping from 1848 that Sconce describes echoes the clip I just showed you in several ways, as do the suspicions of hoaxing that surrounded that story from the mid nineteenth century. One of my initial intentions was to use Sconce to trace a brief history of the relationship between electronic media and haunting, a relationship that often involves disenfranchised members of society, often women, and/or non-adults. I wanted to combine this exploration with a second history, that of the representation of adolescent females in screen horror in general, and in particular, *The Exorcist*, which *Ghostwatch* borrows liberally from. However, I found that I had little to add to Sconce’s analysis, other than to place *Ghostwatch* at the end of it. I also found that the metaphysics and symbolic drama of Hollywood horror were a bad fit with *Ghostwatch*’s aesthetics and intentions; that is, that the tools which yield such rich insights into, say, *The Exorcist*, didn’t really do the same for *Ghostwatch*. Perhaps this is me being blinkered, and perhaps that’s something we can discuss afterwards. By contrast, I became increasingly interested in the other link between *Ghostwatch* and children. Namely, that some children *watched* the programme.

Before I proceed to the main business of this paper, I should make clear that what I'm about to offer is not an effects study, nor really an audience study. Rather, I see myself as working here in the broad field that is sometimes called *historical poetics*. I'm interested in exploring what meanings were *possible* on British television in 1992, ie. how broadcasting was shaped, at the points of production and reception, by its constraints, norms, etcetera. I hope that it will become clearer what I mean as I go on. I hope it will also become clear that *Ghostwatch* is a text that highlights these constraints and norms in a particularly vivid way, partly because it pushes against so many of them. Finally by way of introduction, I'll note that my key personal discovery whilst thinking through this argument has been the following: to think about how the relationship between children and broadcasting is conceptualised and discussed is a very good way to get at the more general issue of what kind of a thing broadcasting is, and how that thing is historically contingent, and indeed, has changed since 1992.

In what follows I'm going to be drawing principally on three main sources of evidence which offer traces of initial audience, including child audience, reactions, to *Ghostwatch*, and which highlight the particular problems and challenges the programme presented to its viewers. The first source is the already-mentioned right-to-reply programme *Biteback*, broadcast in mid-November 1992. The second is David Buckingham's scholarly monograph *Moving Images: Understanding Children's Emotional Responses to Television*, based on research undertaken in 1993 and 1994. The third is the main points of the Broadcasting Standards Council's eventual censure of *Ghostwatch* in 1995. I'm going to briefly extract some key points from each, and then offer some observations about broadcasting and interpretation, with specific but not exclusive reference to children.

First, here's a brief clip from *Biteback*.

[[Show YouTube clip.](#)]

A whole article could be written just about this episode of *Biteback*, but I'll restrict myself to pulling out the comments made about parents, presenters and children. Note that Michael Parkinson is described as 'fatherly' and Sarah Greene and Mike Smith as being 'synonymous with children's television'. The BBC is sometimes derogatorily referred to as 'aunty', but here, these presenters, and by extension, the BBC itself, are being positioned as trusted parents. Some of the other comments made in what we've just seen are echoed in my remaining sources.

So let's move on to David Buckingham and his book. Buckingham, undertaking research funded by the Broadcasting Standards Council, interviewed a range of school children of different ages, and their parents. He undertook the research in the school year 93/94, meaning that *Ghostwatch* was still fresh in several participants' memories, and it was a text that came up, unprompted, quite frequently. Once again, there's more to be said on this topic than I can possibly squeeze in here, but, here, on the basis of his discussions, is what Buckingham concludes: 'It would not seem unreasonable to conclude that *Ghostwatch* was an irresponsible piece of broadcasting.' Those who don't know Buckingham's work should immediately be told that he is not generally quick to condemn or panic about children watching scary or otherwise potentially troubling stuff. Buckingham rests his assertion on a few points. He notes that the programme could be argued to have been targeted at young viewers due to the fact that it was 'trailed in the early evening' and, echoing *Biteback*, because it featured presenters familiar from children's television. But Buckingham's most incisive point, for me, about the programme draws upon the broader argument

in his book about the ‘framing’ of children’s television viewing. Buckingham suggests that through recognising the codes that mark a programme as, for example, factual or fictional, young viewers can orient themselves appropriately, and activate the relevant ‘coping strategies’, sometimes with the help of older, more experienced viewers. Clearly, *Ghostwatch* throws a spanner in these works, with many *adults*, as the programme’s reception demonstrates, hesitant or flat-out deceived about the programme’s truth-status. As Buckingham puts it, ‘the consequences of this blurring of fact and fiction in terms of children’s emotional responses are often problematic, not least because the strategies that parents and children develop for coping with those responses may prove irrelevant or ineffective.’

*Ghostwatch* was billed in the Radio Times and elsewhere as a drama. It featured actors who would have been familiar to regular BBC viewers. However, within the programme the factual content is played straight and there are no interruptions or disclaimers. Even the continuity announcement that directly preceded the programme could be accused of coyness and equivocation, given that it went as follows: ‘Now on BBC One, *Screen One* presents an unusual and sometimes disturbing film marking Halloween. Over the centuries there have been countless reports of ghosts and ghouls but the line between fact and fiction has always been unclear. Using the modern idiom of the Outside Broadcast, Michael Parkinson, Sarah Greene, Mike Smith and Craig Charles star in *Ghostwatch*.’

My final piece of evidence is the Broadcasting Standards Council’s censure of *Ghostwatch*. My research hasn’t yet extended to seeing the report itself, so I’ve had to rely on it being reported and quoted in the broadsheets. *The Guardian* quoted these words: ‘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. While in a different context this would have been appropriate after the 9pm watershed, the presence in the programme of presenters familiar from children's programmes . . . took some parents off-guard in deciding whether their children could continue to view.'

I want to try now to draw some points together. We might summarise the substance of the critiques of *Ghostwatch* in relation to child viewers articulated in the sources we've just skimmed as follows:

1. *Ghostwatch*, like all broadcast content, was in principle available to (post-watershed) child viewers.

2. Not only this, children were encouraged to watch in TV advertisements earlier in the evening and by the inclusion of presenters familiar from children's television.

3. The mixed signals of the broadcast heightened the horror. On the one hand, the familiar presenters offered false reassurance. On the other, the realist setting and rhetoric encouraged credulity, thus intensifying the horror and bringing it 'closer to home'.

That third point, by the way, relates to issues of what has been termed 'modality' by key writers on children's engagements with television, including Hodge and Tripp in their 1986 book *Children and Television*, and Maire Messenger-Davies in her 1997 book *Fake, Fact and Fantasy: Children's Interpretations of Television Reality*.

I just want to take a further step back for a moment and say a few words about television.

Television is an unruly and unmasterable creator of textual material, an issue that any television scholar must grapple with constantly. Perhaps there are no truly discrete texts in any medium, but cultural artefacts like novels and films are more easily dealt with as bounded objects, whose thresholds one is much less likely to cross unwillingly or unpreparedly. Television is always being interrupted, is always overflowing, and has the capacity that it shares only with radio to be chanced upon. Not only this, it is a staggeringly heterogeneous offering, with fact and fiction regularly mixing and mingling.

The responses to, ie. *against*, *Ghostwatch* tell us at least three things about broadcasting and potentially vulnerable or less-than-ideally critical viewers, children among them.

One: there is, or at least was in 1992, still a strong tendency to treat television as a transparent window, ie. to misrecognise it as offering access to immediate, unmediated experience, as not being a medium at all. TV dramatist Dennis Potter once said that most television drama was about the picture in the frame rather than the frame around the picture, and it is true that many televisual codes connote 'transparency'. When a programme like *Ghostwatch* subverts these codes, it can be troubling, and cause trouble.

Two: as just mentioned, television can be stumbled upon and viewers, including children, might lack the context to make proper sense of what they are seeing. Yes, the paratextual material, listings, continuity announcements, etc, might issue warnings and disclaimers, but what use are these if you just decide to see what's on?



Turning this point on its head. Three: whilst television programmes *may* be chanced upon ‘a-contextually’ in the way just described, there is also usually a recognition, more or less sophisticated, more or less implicit, that any given programme is part of, to use two venerable television studies concepts, an overall flow, or a televisual supertext. This is the particular rub in the case of *Ghostwatch*. Criticism and censure of it were less in the name of utterly naïve viewers, because if you don’t know about the codes of factual programming or who Sarah Greene is, you can’t really be deceived or falsely reassured. Rather, it was in the name of what we might, perhaps somewhat cruelly, call semi-sophisticated viewers, who recognise the codes but don’t recognise them *as* codes. Viewers who failed to take that reflexive, second-order step were drawn in by their knowledge of conventions and personnel - so it felt especially ‘real’ because of its rhetoric and especially ‘safe’ because of its presenters - but they were not inoculated by scepticism. Of course, all texts are in fact intertexts, and are read as such. Novels will often be read in relation to the reader’s knowledge of the author. Popular fiction films will often activate a series of pre-existing knowledge of its stars. Novels and films will activate generic expectations. But to return once more to the fact that the borders of broadcast content are so much more permeable, it is easier in the case of broadcasting to access or activate such paratextual or intertextual material only partially, or inappropriately, as was the case with *Ghostwatch*.

I want to end on an historical note. Anyone whose primary allegiance is with film or television, as is the case with me, probably feels their hackles rising every time ‘new media’ are described as magically creating, as if for the first time in history, ‘active viewers’, as though all viewing of screen fiction were not already active. Contemporary television viewing, for those equipped with smartphones, smart TVs

and broadband, may well be more twitchy, but it is not necessarily in all ways more active. Caroline Levine, a scholar of literature, has published a wonderful book explaining how Victorian novels sought to give rise to an ‘epistemic pause’ as a way of educating their readers to suspend their judgment and deploy their reason.

In a retrospective documentary the producers of *Ghostwatch* have suggested that the cowardice of today’s BBC executives means such a programme would never get made now. I would want to argue that even if it were, because of the contemporary *framing* of television viewing, the programme could not act in the same way. People would not be trying to contact switchboards. At a touch of a button, they could call up the paratextual information about the programme that they desired, and that would not lie to them. Rather than asking themselves, ‘What is this, what does it mean, and how is it speaking to me?’, they would defer to external authority. This may remove some of what we might call the particular ‘dangers’ of broadcasting for potentially vulnerable audiences outlined above, but it is perhaps not an ideal recipe for critical thinking, or for media literacy.