Understanding History and Causality through the Television Ghost Story

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Derek Johnston, Queen’s University Belfast, derek.johnston@qub.ac.uk

Ghosts disrupt time. The most standard view of the ghost story may be that it is an irruption of the past into the present: for example, Nick Freeman writing about ‘Haunted Houses’ in *The Routledge Handbook to the Ghost Story* claims that ‘Haunted houses are the traditional setting for this intersection of the past with the present (or perhaps the meeting between the ghost and the future it cannot participate in except through the re-enactment of what it has done before.)’¹ Similarly, Simon Hay in *A History of the Modern British Ghost Story* states that ‘the whole point of the ghost story is that the present cannot wrench free of the past’.² Yet I am sure that I have no need to tell anyone here that, while this may be a common view, and a useful one, it is not true of all ghost stories. In this paper, I will explore the television ghost story, and some examples of how it engages with ideas of history, time and causality. This will, of necessity, be a brief run-through of some concepts with some quick examples, but it will hopefully at least serve to spur some discussion.

Before I continue: my proposal and abstract for this paper stated that it would concentrate on the BBC series *The Living and the Dead* as a case study. As events have actually transpired, I have done much preliminary exploration of that series across two conference papers already this summer, at the After Fantastika and International Gothic Association conferences. The scripts for both papers are uploaded to Humanities Commons and can be read there. This paper, then, is going to look more generally at the television ghost story and its relationship with history and, particularly how the television ghost story can influence or inform our understanding of causality.

So let us start from the most basic concept, that one outlined in those opening quotations, that present the ghost story as an irruption of the past into the present, and particularly as a demonstration of the present as being unable to escape the past. Most

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commonly, this is because the ghost presents a historical crime or represents a historical horror which must be either understood or resolved in the present. There are two aspects to this that I want to consider: the understanding of history, and the understanding of causality. This is to move on from basic considerations of the *representation* of history and engagement with nostalgia.

That said, it is worth remembering that the ghost story can contribute to our understanding of the historical past in the same way that any other representation of the past does, contributing to our ‘prosthetic memory’, to borrow Alison Landsberg’s phrase, of particular periods and events, and generally contributing to our personal collection of imagery and ideas of the past. The narrative itself may involve historical events, as with *The Clifton House Mystery* and its haunting related to the Bristol Riots of 1831, where a mob protesting the rejection of the second Reform Bill, which would have provided increased parliamentary representation to Bristol and other growing cities, were put down by the use of cavalry. Beyond the narrative itself, just because it is presented as a tale of the supernatural, that does not mean that we immediately relegate all aspects of the presentation of the narrative to a ‘not real history’ bin in our memory. All of the costumes, sets, props, locations, ways of acting and talking, and the historical background, all serve to add to or reinforce our existing conceptions of the period presented.

This builds to what Helen Wheatley has considered as a ‘feel bad’ version of Andrew Higson’s idea of the ‘heritage drama’, a period drama in which any political content is effectively suppressed by the attractiveness of the presentation and the attention to the details of the pleasures of life as a member of the upper classes. Wheatley considers how Gothic television uses the same attention to detail in costume, sets, locations and props to depict the past, but presents them in a way that emphasises the discomfort, the wear, the restriction related to these. In other words, this is a dark heritage of oppression rather than a pleasant heritage of beautiful surroundings and clothes. As far as our understanding of history goes, then, the Gothic drama, and its relative the ghost story, in presenting a period setting which

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abounds in persuasive period detail but where it is not perpetual golden sunlight, where clothes are as restrictive as manners and social structures rather than simply visual delights and indicators of wealth, through these means the past is presented as more complex and more oppressive, encouraging the viewer to think more about the history.

As suggested by mentions of props, costumes and locations, the television ghost story, like the film, has the benefit over prose text of presenting far more information at any one time. The viewer, mainly unconsciously, will take in the general details of props, costumes, locations, sets, actions, rather than just those picked out by the author. There is therefore a more general experiential breadth to the television ghost story and its presentation of the past than in the prose or radio version.

And the ghost story has the advantage over the period drama in that it can emphasise the connection between past and present. Obviously, if the drama is entirely set in the past, such as the majority of the BBC Ghost Stories for Christmas, then it is left to the viewer to make any continued connections between, say, the loneliness of the titular ‘The Signalman’ and the psychological effects of isolation in the present day. However, even productions set purely in the past emphasise that history is not something that is simply ‘in the past’ and gone, but is something that has led to and continues to influence the present. The ghost is, in other words, the past remaining active in the present.

An example of this is the BBC series Remember Me, a title which itself sets out the urgency of the connection between past and present. Drawing on the actual history of the poor treatment of Indian ayas (or nannies) who brought colonial-era British children back to Britain, where the ayas were abandoned in favour of British nannies, and had to find their own way back to India or find other employment. But by setting the main narrative in contemporary Yorkshire, complete with its well-established Asian population, the series raised issues of the interconnectedness of British and Asian societies and cultures, wrapped up in themes of care and abandonment. The narrative uncovers some actual elements of history – the treatment of the ayas and of the colonial children – and then raises questions around what the effects of these were at the time and what the consequences of those actual historical elements have
been. It also raises parallels between past and present, serving to emphasise the central theme of care and family, while allowing that theme to be extended out from family to wider culture.

In this way the ghost story operates in the way that Simon Hay identified: ‘a model of history as traumatically rather than nostalgically available to us.’ They repeatedly introduce us to the traumas of the past, traumas that are still part of our society, traumas that affect how we live now. In doing so they encourage us to consider how we treat the past and how it connects to our present and future. In Nigel Kneale’s *The Stone Tape*, the ghosts that haunt a building are recordings of past traumas held within the specific matrices of the stones from which the oldest parts of the building are made. These recordings are accessed technologically by a team of experimenters looking to develop a new recording medium, one that will provide ample future profit. In doing so, they erase the traumas of the past, because they do not care for the past and the stories of those people whose lives their own are built upon. And by erasing these newer layers, they uncover a deeper, primeval horror, that results in the death of one of their number, the one who *did* care about the past, and who was herself most receptive to the hauntings. In other words, the technologizing desire for continual advancement in the service of profit led to ignoring, overwriting and erasing the actual lived, experiential and emotional past of those who had come before. The desire for a particular future led to ignoring the most important, emotional and experiential lessons to be learned from the past, with fatal consequences.

And that brings me on to those rare ghost stories that deal with intrusions of the future into the present. In literary terms, we can think of the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come. In television terms, we might think of Nigel Kneale’s *The Road*, in which an Eighteenth Century scientist and philosopher explore the strange lights and sounds haunting some woodland. While they are baffled, the Twentieth Century viewer would have recognised the sounds as those of people attempting to flee a nuclear attack, something so appalling that it drives the impression of events back through time. And Kneale’s own comments on the Eighteenth Century characters indicate the significance of causality in this play, not in specifics but in

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general terms: the iconoclast who is certain of the perfectible future and the natural philosopher who is ‘the prototype of the socially irresponsible scientist’. These attitudes combined will lead to the technological and social horrors that result in the nuclear attack, and in our own technological confinement and fears.⁵

*The Living and the Dead* similarly mixed the past, the present of the narrative, and the future of the narrative’s main temporal setting, in a way that emphasised the confusion of our typical understanding of causality. Characters are motivated by their experiences, but their experiences may be from engagement with the events of the past that still haunt the place, but they may also be from engagement with events from the future that are also haunting the place. Speaking about causality leads to problems with tenses, so here’s an example from the first episode of the series, which arguably sets in motion much of the tragedy that unfolds.

As lead characters Nathan and Charlotte join in the solstice celebrations, they continue the traditional cycle of an Appleby always leading the ritual / party. Meanwhile, upstairs in the house Nathan’s ailing mother is disturbed, as we hear an unseen woman’s voice calling Nathan’s name, and the door to his mother’s room opens. The shock of what she sees as the door opens makes her heart give out, and she dies, her grip failing on the snow globe of Vienna that Nathan had given her as a souvenir of his attending a conference there, literally trapping that moment in time in an object. The snow globe is dominant on the screen, and the only thing that moves, encouraging us to pay attention to it, and when we do we should notice that the light from the doorway that is reflected in the snow globe is a bright blue-white, a light not seen elsewhere in the nineteenth-century house.

Because this is a twenty-first century light. Nathan’s mother has seen her great-great-great-granddaughter, and that sight has killed her. Without her death, Nathan and Charlotte would not have decided to stay on at Shepzoy at that point, and at any later point they may have decided that the estate was past saving. Without the events that occur to them there, there would be no reason for the twenty-first century woman to return to the house in

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her time to try to learn more about Nathan. So the future can be understood to cause the past. And this intrusion of the future into the past is potentially the source of all of the supernatural troubles that are faced in the series.

I would argue that, even more directly than *The Road*, this is drawing attention to the way that the future is dependent upon the choices of the present, but that our choices made in the present are also themselves influenced by our ideas of what will happen in the future. As with time travel narratives, the ghost story that features ghosts from the future emphasises that what we choose to do now will make the future. The traumas that we cause now will haunt the future. And the ghosts make concrete for us the results of those choices.

So this is my main concept, or wild generalisation. Ghost stories are about consequences. They are also about history. They present history as something which is not a sequence of events, but as something which is continuous. Not only do ghost stories present history as continuous, but they emphasise that the decisions made in the past affect the future, and that the future is thus birthed from the present and past, and that how we think about the effects of our decisions, how we consider possible futures, will also influence the present.

Obviously, each individual television ghost story is different. But I do think that there is value in considering them not simply as entertainments, not simply as informative about specific factual aspects of the past, but also as ways of engaging with ideas of history and causality. In a larger discussion that would include the way that the ghost story frequently subverts the history books to present a personalised experience of history, usually from those neglected by formal history. There are also discussions to had around linearity and cyclicality in time in the ghost story, as the recurring ghostly occurrence is a cyclical interruption of apparently linear time. But the results of that recurrence potentially change each time because of the other factors involved, such as the historical context, the people involved, etc.. But that, ironically, needs more time and space to deal with.

Thank you.