This paper focuses on UK and US traditions of seasonal horror on television and radio at Christmas and Halloween to consider how they provide opportunities for reflection on the causes of fear at liminal times in the calendar. These liminal times contain numerous traditions dedicated to looking back and forward, such as end of year reviews, or addresses from heads of state to the ‘family’ of the nation in which they consider the past year and look hopefully to the future. As part of these traditions, the seasonal horror story, whether delivered as an oral tradition, published, or broadcast, offers a clear opportunity to engage with causes of unease and fear. At the same time, it allows these fears to be diminished as they are treated as ‘just entertainment’, and traditional forms of the seasonal horror story are recreated as nostalgic pastiche or given a comedy treatment. Even here, these more-lighthearted renditions can allow audiences to engage with and work through issues that concern them in ways similar to those stories intended to cause fear, even if the fear itself is softened. This paper will outline the significance of narratives of fear as part of traditions of reflection at particular seasons.

While my abstract promised a focus on US and UK, I am actually going to concentrate on the UK here, and particularly on the UK Christmas. This is partly so as to give a closer focus that can be managed in 20 minutes, and partly because I have recently edited a dossier on Christmas television for the Journal of Popular Television which should be out towards the end of this year, so the subject is on my mind.

The calendar, it has been argued, builds a social and cultural element on top of natural cycles. As Paddy Scannell put it [SLIDE], ‘It not only organises and coordinates social life, but gives it a renewable content, anticipatory pleasures, a horizon of expectations.’ (16) The calendar of broadcasting adds a further layer to this, developing largely secular traditions which are bound up, through the national structure of much broadcasting, with elements of national identity. Roger Silverstone emphasises that [SLIDE] ‘Broadcast national events articulate calendar time: at Christmas, Thanksgiving, Coronation or Royal Wedding, Cup Final or Superbowl’ (1994: 20) These elements may be conscious, such as using the head of state to provide an annual speech to the national and diasporic family. Or they may be unconscious, understood simply as developments from existing traditions, because that is what is done by us.

An example of this second form of national identity through calendar tradition can be found in the ways that seasonal horror narratives are handled in the UK and
US. In the UK, broadcasting has been dominated by the English tradition of the Christmas ghost or supernatural narrative. In the US, Halloween has been the traditional time for the horrifying tale, building in part on traditions derived from Scottish and Irish immigration. Yet in neither case is there a particularly national element to the festival; it’s just the way we do things in our imagined communities. Of course, there is overlap, particularly with the spread of Halloween through US service people and US media.

And, of course, horror tales can be, and are, told at any time of the year, although their popularity tends to decline in summer, except in the case of Korea, where a tradition has developed since the 1970s of film or television horror to act as ‘chillers’ against the summer heat. This may not just be down to the word-play, which I am assured operates in Korean as well as English, but may also connect to other storytelling traditions associated with summer festivals.

In the UK, though, summer is also a less popular time for drama and television in general, let alone horror specifically. Before broadcasting, when people had to entertain themselves through the long winter nights, we encounter the idea of ‘winter’s tales’ as something told by grandams to the family around the winter fire. Such winter’s tales are often assumed, in mentions in fifteenth and sixteenth century dramas for example, to be fantastic stories of the supernatural.

However, there are existing traditions of seasonal horror in the US and UK, as I examined in my book on seasonal horror, and it is the argument of this paper that they fit in with other existing traditions of using the end of the calendar year as a time to reflect on the past, as well as to look forward to the future. The horror genre is particularly well-suited to encouraging conscious or unconscious reflection. Matt Hills has argued that ‘horror involves not just an outward-focused “emotional reaction” to textual content, but that it also, necessarily, involves introspection over one’s own emotional and affective states,’ building on Robert Solomon’s claim that ‘Horror is not just confrontation with an object. It is an imaginative confrontation with oneself’ (25-26). This is because of the way that horror makes us react emotionally, and so encourages us to question why we had that particular reaction to that particular stimulus.
Of course, the ghost story in particular is heavily associated with the past that comes back to haunt us, while the Gothic strand in broadcast horror as in literature is also linked to the horrors of the past, and these more ‘genteel’ forms of horror are the kinds more likely to be found in seasonal horror programming. It is this integral engagement with the past as originating something to be feared that persists into the present that makes the ghost story particularly relevant to this end-of-year period of reflection. This relevance then serves to reinforce the place of horror-as-entertainment within seasonal festivities.

This seasonal pattern can be understood as part of the reinforcing of society and cultural norms. In turn, this then provides what Giddens termed ‘ontological security’, which Scannell glossed as being [SLIDE]:

the confidence or trust that the natural and social worlds are as they appear to be, including the basic existential parameters of self and social identity.(29)

Not only did this shared experience through broadcasting help to provide a sense of security, but Scannell also argues that [SLIDE]:

Broadcasting brought together for a radically new kind of general public the elements of a culture-in-common (national and transnational) for all. In so doing, it redeemed, and continues to redeem, the intelligibility of the world and the communicability of experience in the widest social sense. (29)

This sense of commonality was particularly strong at Christmas, with Scannell claiming that [SLIDE] ‘From the very beginning Christmas was always the most important date in the broadcast year. It was the supreme family festival, an invocation of the spirit of Dickens, a celebration of "home, hearth and happiness".' (19) And while those might sound like conditions which would have little place for horror, horror programming has formed a consistent part of the UK Christmas broadcast schedules, and often in places where it would have no place at other times of the year, such as episodes of The Bill.

This is acceptable because of the long tradition of ghost and horror tales at this time of the year. The existence of the tradition means that using the medium of horror to reflect on things which can, do or may disrupt society or our lives can
be considered as comforting, pleasurable, or at least normative, because it is done at the appropriate time of year. It forms part of our culture-in-common by which we make sense of the world. In other words, the reception of the form is modified by its temporal context: a Christmas ghost story is a more acceptable form of reflection on horrors in the UK, particularly the English, context because it is a *Christmas* ghost story.

And by being a *Christmas* ghost story, the seasonal horror fits into a season that contains a lot of reflection. There is [SLIDE] the monarch’s speech, end of year round-ups, Christmas specials, revivals, repeats and revisitations of favoured programmes from the past. While there is certainly an element of looking forward at this period, the Christmas holiday is established in many ways as a time for looking backwards and reflecting.

But how does it play out in practice?

The particular benefits of the supernatural story in terms of reflection are twofold. One, they explicitly present an engagement with the past or with a representation of the feared thing, often in a metaphorical form. Two, they present it in the framework of entertainment, which allows it to be consciously dismissed as ‘just a story’, while the appropriate elements can continue to be engaged with on a conscious analytical or a subconscious level.

The supernatural can act within these narratives to provide reconciliation and resolution of past, unresolved issues for the characters within the drama. The most obvious example of this comes in the numerous adaptations of [SLIDE] Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol, in Prose, Being a Ghost Story of Christmas*. In Dickens’ short novel, the miserly Scrooge comes to respect the need for the free flow of capital throughout the system, and to understand that greater productivity can come from treating his staff well. In the adaptations, more focus tends to be placed on the importance of family, and the construction of social bonds rather than financial ones. This picks up on the idea of Christmas as being a time for family, while removing some of the specific social and historical context of the original novel. While the fear of poverty is not entirely removed from the adaptations, it is the fear of loneliness and separation from family that is emphasised, and that is resolved.
In the Christmas *Lark Rise to Candleford*, [SLIDE] the ghost of Cinderella Doe, a suicide, haunts the hamlet of Lark Rise and town of Candleford. The ghost's interactions with the characters emphasise the divisions and ties that exist between them, highlighting these relationships for the viewer, but also encouraging the characters to consider them themselves. Once again, the supernatural plays its part in encouraging reflection on relationships with family and neighbours, emphasising the fear of loneliness and of separation over any other fears.

The same fears play out in a more specific way in [SLIDE] the *Black Mirror* Christmas episode ‘White Christmas’. What is more specific here is that the stories emphasise a fear of how technology is encouraging this loneliness and separation, itself part of the general fear of the dehumanising effects of technology, and also the antisocial aspects of social media practices. This is particularly demonstrated by the narrative which shows the ‘blocking’ ability of social media brought into everyday life, to make clear the potential effects of being ostracised on the person who is ‘blocked’. They are effectively surrounded by ghosts, aware of the presence of other people but with unable to interact with them.

Similarly, in the Christmas episode [SLIDE] ‘The House’ of sitcom *Not Going Out*, the characters gather in an old Victorian house owned by a distant relative, in which the lead character, Lee, had spent his childhood Christmases. The house is about to be sold, the relative having died. Of course, the house appears to be haunted, until Lee’s unreliable trickster of a father explains that he had staged certain events in order to bring him and Lee closer together, recognising that their relationship was strained. The fake haunting was all about generating reconciliation within the family. However, he also denies responsibility for some of the unusual events that had happened during the stay, and when Lee reminisces about spending happy childhood Christmases in the cellar playing with the neighbours’ boy, his father points out that the neighbours didn’t have any children. They flee the house, and a ghostly boy materialises in the rocking chair, looks into the camera and wishes the viewers ‘Merry Christmas!’

The drive to have characters reflect on the past in a Christmas episode can obviously serve narrative and production functions. It may offer a chance for a cheap clip show, as characters reminisce ‘remember when...’ It provides a moment of pause in the onward flow of an ongoing series, in the same way that
the Christmas holidays will provide a moment of pause in the onward flow of the daily lives of the viewers. It provides an opportunity for occasional, or new, viewers to catch up on the current state of the characters and their relationships. But by seeing the repeated representation of Christmas as a time for reflection by characters, this also reinforces the concept of Christmas as a time for reflection by the viewers, that this is the norm. While viewers may not have a supernatural intervention to encourage them to consider particular aspects of their lives, the idea that this is a time for looking back and trying to achieve a sense of resolution is still reinforced.

The resolution can apply to the characters, but in a way that can only be put together by the audience. For example, the first [SLIDE] Downton Abbey Christmas special included a subplot in which the belowstairs staff find and use a Ouija board. While initially there are tricks played with it, towards the end of the episode the two most trustworthy characters in the show, Daisy and Anna, decide to try the board on their own. It spells out a message, ‘May they be happy. With my love.’ The next scene has Matthew proposing to Mary, with the implication being that the board was spelling out a message from his dead first wife.

As has already been noted, these reflections and resolutions that apply to the characters largely revolve around relationships, particularly family and neighbours or community, and the fears of loneliness and separation. These are clearly significant social fears, and fit particularly well with the conception of Christmas as a time for family and community. But they are not the only fears that are dealt with in seasonal horror.

As well as the technological fears of Black Mirror, we can see the fear of the effects of grief in the adaptation of [SLIDE] The Woman in Black scripted for ITV by Nigel Kneale, while other dramas focus on other fears and dislocations. In the Christmas special for horror anthology [SLIDE] Inside Number 9 we were presented with what first appeared to be an affectionate (and superbly executed) pastiche of a 1970s television studio-shot horror drama. This was emphasised by the interjection of the plummy tones of the director of the piece, commenting on the action as if on a DVD commentary. However, it gradually becomes apparent that this is not the case, and that we are not being presented with a straightforward affectionate pastiche of somewhat cheesy horror, but that the supernatural horror drama that we seem to be watching is actually a real horror drama. It is a snuff film, in which someone is actually tortured and killed, and the ‘commentary’ is being delivered as part of a police interview.
The amusement and entertainment is drained away, the idea of supernatural horror as something fun is maintained, but we are presented with a horrible, mundane, non-supernatural crime. And that reinforces the idea that we need to look back and think about these horrors, not just enjoy the slightly scary ride, but consider what we are being entertained by.

And this, as I hope I have demonstrated, is all part of the use of fear as part of the wider process of reflection in the Christmas season. Similar considerations could be applied to other seasonal horror traditions, possibly with some adjustments to account for the specifics of culture and tradition; Halloween in particular is about policing the boundaries of accepted behaviour within the community, especially in its more traditional celebrations. But the combination of a season which emphasises reflection and a genre which engages with social and cultural as well as personal fears emphasises this process of reflection and engagement with the causes and effects of those fears.

Thank you.

Works Cited