The Broadcast Afterlife of the Christmas Ghost Story
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There is a long tradition in the UK, in England in particular, of the Christmas ghost story. The most famous is probably Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol in Prose, Being a Ghost Story of Christmas*, but close behind are the ghost stories of M.R.James. James wrote many of his stories as Christmas entertainments, but this link was reinforced in the 1970s when the BBC broadcast an annual *Ghost Story for Christmas*, most of which were adapted from James. However, these are not the only examples of broadcast Christmas ghost stories, which also include Christmas episodes of typically non-supernatural programmes which are given a supernatural twist. This paper will examine the significance of this broadcast afterlife of the Christmas ghost story, as a perpetuator of tradition, retaining a largely oral delivery, but which is also subject to the shifting broadcast landscape. This subjects the Christmas ghost story to the gaze of those without this specific cultural tradition, raising the potential for confusion in valuable international markets. In turn, this raises the question of whether the culturally-specific Christmas ghost story has much of an afterlife left in the face of the internationalisation of broadcasting.

This was originally going to be a paper about how linear broadcasting on television and radio has helped to preserve a cultural tradition, that of the Christmas ghost story in England. However, since proposing my paper, we have had Christmas 2016, and following that the press releases and analysis of the viewing figures for that season. I have also had the chance to update my research database of relevant programming on British television for the Christmases of 2015 and 2016, and all point to much the same conclusion. This tradition, which has survived from oral culture, been transformed to a literary variant, and evolved again into a broadcast version, is dying. Or possibly not dying completely – there are reasons to think that this is not the case – but going through another transformation to another form of afterlife. Maybe our hope for this tradition is in its shifting through various forms of undeath, and particularly in the resurrection of earlier ways of being.

As is usual when I open one of my papers on this subject in a new national or cultural context, I’d like to start with a question: how many people here find the idea of Christmas ghost stories unsurprising, or even normal?

Now, I might expect the idea to be more familiar here than outside a conference on the Gothic. But I might also expect there to be less familiarity in New Zealand culture, although I shall now demonstrate horrendous lack of cultural sensitivity by generalising based on an Australian source... [SLIDE] As you can see, back in 1872 ‘An Australian Colonist’ reported back that there were no Christmas ghost stories in Australia, because ‘No ghost could stand the bold glance of an Australian sun, or tarry where no ivy robes old mouldering ruins, and no churchyard drear exhales the poisonous breath in which the prowling spirits revel.’ [1] Now, there are a number of things that we can take from this: firstly, this article presents the UK as a gothically horrible place throughout, cold and miserable and full of Dickensian social inequality. Secondly, there is the idea that ghost stories are unsuited to the light and warmth of the Australian Christmas. And behind that lies another assumption: that Christmas ghost stories are themselves things that a British readership would consider to be normal.

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To briefly justify my generalisation, I have been doing some quick newspaper archive research on the New Zealand Christmas, and found an 1893 article from *The Pall Mall Magazine* entitled ‘Christmas in New Zealand’. Here, Edward John Hart wrote that ‘it is seldom one finds an entire family together, for in New Zealand, as throughout Australasia, the climate exerts a disintegrating influence on the family circle.’ This is important because the Christmas ghost story has long been seen as part of the familial bonding experience of the festivities.

This dates back to the earliest traces of the Christmas ghost story tradition. Unlike many traditions which seem to stem from the 18th and 19th centuries, the tradition of telling scary supernatural tales at the end of the year does appear to be genuinely ancient. It is obviously difficult, if not impossible, to trace an oral tradition, but by the 15th and 16th centuries there are mentions of ‘winter’s tales’ in the works of Shakespeare, Marlowe and others. These are stories of wonder, horror and superstition that are typically described as the sort of thing told by grandmothers at the fireside to entertain and frighten the little ones on long winter nights. The tradition is picked up as a literary one by the periodicals of the nineteenth century, with the work of Dickens and others as editors and writers, often making explicit mention of the Christmas ghost story as an oral tradition of long standing: Indeed, while these stories were authored and printed, they often maintained an oral form of delivery, being read aloud to the family from the printed page. Dickens, of course, was famous for performing his own work, including *A Christmas Carol*. Edwardian writers such as M.R.James followed this tradition, with James famously writing his first ghost stories as pieces for him to read to his students and fellow scholars as part of Christmas festivities. My focus, however, is on how these traditions then appeared in broadcast radio and television.

It is widely accepted that the media, including television, serve as transmitters and reinforcers of culture, whether that is through the direct pageantry of media events such as coronations, inaugurations or major sporting events, or through the banal reinforcement of everyday norms. However, the idea of television and radio as transmitters and reinforcers of tradition has received less attention. That has been part of the reasoning behind my research into the Christmas ghost story, spurred by being introduced to the BBC’s 1970s *Ghost Story for Christmas* strand and wondering why the idea of Christmas ghost stories seemed perfectly normal. As a result, I not only researched the history of the ghost story at Christmas before broadcasting, but also have searched through nearly every issue of the main British broadcast listings magazines, the *Radio Times* and the *TV Times*, to develop a database of horror programming at Christmas. And that has not only brought some interesting productions to light, but has also produced some interesting results. Which is a relief.

Broadcasts relating to the Christmas ghost story tradition come in a number of forms. First, there is the non-fiction programme about the supernatural at Christmas, or about Christmas ghost stories. Indeed, the first programme that I could identify related to Christmas ghost stories and supernatural traditions was broadcast on Christmas Eve 1923, and was Mr A.M.Perkins giving a talk on *Old Christmas Customs and Superstitions* for the BBC radio network. One programme that I would very much have liked to hear was the discussion on ghost stories broadcast on Christmas Even 1929, between Desmond McCarthy, EF Benson and WW Jacobs...

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Secondly, there is the reading of a Christmas ghost story, whether performed by the author themselves or by an actor. This often picks up on the Victorian or Edwardian academic or gentleman’s club setting in which stories like those of M.R.James may have originally been performed, or which serves as a frame to the literary versions of these stories. Such readings, which may involve only one actor, are relatively simple and inexpensive to produce, and seem to be the one genre of fiction where even television has, until recently, thought the straight reading to camera was suitable for adults as well as children. As a result, there have been many such performances over the years, including everyone from Algernon Blackwood and E.F.Benson, through Tom Baker, to Christopher Lee.

Thirdly, there is the adaptation of a Christmas ghost story, taking it beyond a simple reading. Probably the most common text to be adapted in this way is Dickens’ ‘A Christmas Carol’, but other key adaptations include the BBC’s 1970s strand known as ‘A Ghost Story for Christmas’, which largely drew on the work of M.R.James, but included two original stories and an adaptation of Dickens’ ‘The Signalman’. ‘The Signalman’ has also been adapted many times over the decades, as well as being another popular text for a straightforward reading.

Fourth, there is the original supernatural drama at Christmas. This is actually quite rare, suggesting that the movement across media is significant to this tradition, particularly in terms of adaptation. By adapting a literary text by Dickens or M.R.James or Susan Hill or Sarah Waters, the broadcaster picks up some of the cultural capital of the older form, while also indicating that this is a continuation of an older tradition. As Christmas as a season is very much about tradition and continuation, this makes a perfect match. However, with the establishment of the broadcast Christmas ghost story as a tradition of its own, it is interesting to observe that Channel 4 tried to create its own ongoing Christmas ghost story tradition with annual repeats of its drama ‘A Bouquet of Flowers’, directed by Laurence Gordon Clarke, who had originated the BBC’s 1970s ‘Ghost Story for Christmas’. As this did not receive great reviews, and they did not develop the tradition by producing more original dramas, after three years in a row of repeating the drama, it was dropped. Channel 4 has mostly developed its supernatural seasonal schedule through our fifth form: the broadcast of films not originally made for television.

Or, indeed, radio, possibly the earliest broadcast of a Christmas supernatural film is a transmission of ‘an adaptation from the sound-track of the Renown Pictures’ presentation’ of the Alistair Sim ‘Scrooge’ in 1951, just a month after its theatrical release. While horror films can be found throughout the year on television, as can horror tales in general across broadcasting, the number of horror films and particularly seasons of horror films scheduled during the Christmas season strongly suggests that these are considered to be appropriate to the season. These have frequently focused on ‘classic’ horrors, such as the Universal films of the 1930s and 1940s, Val Lewton’s films of the 1940s, Hammer’s 1950s and 1960s horrors, but they have also included more unusual programming, such as seasons of Chinese ghost stories.

Finally, we have the fascinating form which is the seasonal special of the ongoing series. Here I am particularly interested in those Christmas episodes where a non-supernatural series sees the intrusion of the apparently supernatural into its seasonal episodes. This is often dismissed and explained away by the end of the story, while leaving open a hint that not everything has been rationalised. This dates back at least as far as a 1938 episode of the radio drama series ‘The Pig and Whistle’, where a character reads a ghost story as part of the Christmas episode. More recently, the first ‘Downton Abbey’ Christmas special featured the most trustworthy below-stairs characters using a Ouija board, which apparently spelled out a blessing for the marriage of Matthew and Mary from Matthew’s dead wife. These sorts of eruptions of the supernatural are more likely to occur at Halloween than at Christmas in US
programming, and where US programming does bring in the supernatural for Christmas, it is usually to evoke *A Christmas Carol* or *It’s a Wonderful Life*, or to show the existence of Santa, and is played for warmth and the value of family rather than for scares.

So broadcasting engages with the tradition of the Christmas ghost story in a range of ways across the schedules, and has done from the start of radio in the UK. But we now seem to be facing the death of a tradition, at least on the mainstream, linear, free-to-air television and radio channels. Attempts to revive the BBC’s 1970s *A Ghost Story for Christmas* strand have failed, despite the most recent attempt being led by Mark Gatiss, who said afterwards that the BBC had no real interest in pursuing the form of annual individual dramas. Instead, the Christmas Gothic is served up by an annual *Jonathan Creek* episode, and maybe the *Doctor Who* Christmas special, although the last of these moved away from the Victorian Gothic of recent years to a superhero story, albeit with a nice bit of body horror. This last year [SLIDE], even the horror film seasons of the past have gone; although there were fourteen films shown that I classed as horror, that did mean including *Teen Wolf* and *Wallace & Gromit in The Curse of the Were-Rabbit*, and eight of the remaining films were versions of *A Christmas Carol*. Even the Christmas specials of ongoing programmes were for two comedy programmes, and their supernatural took the form of an *It’s a Wonderful Life* variation, as a lead character is shown how life would be different without them. These are hardly the horrors of yesteryear.

I have counted 26 instances of programming related to seasonal horror over five television channels and five radio channels in 2016. You can see in this table [SLIDE] the last six years’ counts. While there have been years when the counts have been even lower than this, and the numbers have then gone back up again, the last few years have also been accompanied by a general shift in Christmas scheduling and viewership. This can be attributed to the strong establishment and wide spread of a range of other home entertainment options, including cable and satellite channels and on-demand services. As a result, the traditional broadcasters have lost a large share of their audience, although they still dominate viewing preferences, amounting to 52% of total audience share of all TV channels in the UK. But there also appears to be an increased fragmentation of the audience, moving away from the idea of the television forming an alternative hearth, a new form of a focal point for the family in the festive season.

For Christmas 2016, the highest viewing figures were for the *Call the Midwife* Christmas Special, which had an aggregated rating of 9.2 million viewers, including online streaming. This is the smallest audience to gain the top Christmas slot since the current audience recording system began in 1981. The highest recorded UK Christmas audience was 21.8 million people, tuning in live in 1989 to watch the TV premiere of *Crocodile Dundee*. With audiences declining for mainstream television, it is to minority channels that we have to turn for our seasonal supernatural fix. The BBC’s archive-led radio channel, 4Extra, has always had a strong record of playing supernatural material throughout the year, but with an added emphasis at Christmas. But the cost of producing new material, and the perceived smaller

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3 BARB, Share by Channel, [http://www.barb.co.uk/trendspotting/analysis/share-by-channel-2/](http://www.barb.co.uk/trendspotting/analysis/share-by-channel-2/), accessed 21 January 2017

audience for horror programming, mean that at the moment this seems to be a tradition in peril, something for a niche rather than the mainstream.

Of course, this could just be a slump. They’ve happened before. But with the changing demographics of broadcast media, and particularly with a political environment in the UK that is increasingly hostile to public service broadcasting, particularly licence-fee funded public service broadcasting that still is hugely more successful than its commercial competitors in terms of popularity and trade in programming, the end of the broadcast Christmas ghost story may be part of the ongoing death of broadcasting.

Thank you.