The Consolations of Horror: 
Heritage and Tradition in the Televisual Haunted Country House 
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Abstract
It has become a standard approach when considering screen presentations that incorporate the country house to examine them in the light of Andrew Higson’s formulation of the heritage drama, which presented an essentially conservative, depoliticised spectacle of grandeur, safely distanced from the reality of the majority of viewers. However, the country house has also long been a location for the gothic or horror tale, from Castles Otranto, Frankenstein or Dracula, via Abbeys Nightmare, Northanger and Newstead, or less grandly-named, or even nameless, abodes such as those in The Turn of the Screw, Uncle Silas’ Bartram-Haugh or The House of Usher itself. These representations, on page or screen, could be expected to be more subversive than the prettified spectacle of the heritage drama, revealing horrors of the oppressed and repressed beneath the attractive shell of the home. However, this paper will argue that, as the country house has become displaced as the location of horror in film and television, when it does appear in this context it is as part of the comfortably familiar framework of the traditional filmic or televisual Gothic tale. By drawing directly on memories of previous productions and stories these dramas generate a feeling of familiarity, a feeling which operates to provide a comforting envelope around the terrors which are unveiled through the narrative. In particular, the paper focuses on the long tradition of the ghost story at Christmas, which takes in literary and televisual versions of country house horror such as The Turn of the Screw and The Woman in Black, and even the conservative setting of Downton Abbey in its first Christmas special. A ghost in a country house, particularly at Christmas, is no longer a disruptive eruption of abnormality into a conservative normality, it is rather something accepted, expected and traditional.

This paper is about an apparent tension between the cosy, conservative, depoliticised spectacle of the country house on television, and its use as a place of haunting. While country house horror has been read as a turn away from nostalgic comfort and towards a subversion of this conservatism\(^1\), I want to argue that some, at least, of these productions are themselves a cosy form of horror. They fulfil a specific cultural role, and locate our fears within a specific context, thereby containing it. If we expect the ghost in the old dark house, then it is not a disruptive eruption of abnormality into a conservative normality, but rather something accepted, expected and traditional.

This is particularly the case when other factors lead to the expectation of a haunting, such as the time of year. My current research is into seasonal television, and particularly into Christmas ghost stories, and so much of what follows should be thought of in that framework. Essentially, there is a long tradition of Christmas ghost stories in England, with the most famous single example probably being Dickens’ A Christmas Carol, in prose, being a Ghost Story for

Christmas (1843). That, of course, is a haunted urban individual, not a country house, but the tradition is also to be found in Washington Irving’s *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* (1820), where a country parson entertains those gathered at the squire’s country house for Christmas celebrations with a series of ‘strange accounts of popular superstitions and legends of the surrounding country, with which he had become acquainted in the course of his antiquarian researches’.\(^2\) In the cases of both Dickens and Irving, this telling of ghost stories at Christmas is presented as an ancient tradition, but it is one that is continued largely through their efforts to publicise it, becoming particularly associated with Dickens through his editorial control over Christmas issues of *All the Year Round* and *Household Words*, in which he guided other writers to create the Christmas narratives that he desired, as well as continuing to contribute his own Christmas stories. After Dickens, the literary Christmas ghost story can often be seen as indebted to him either directly or indirectly, but a conscious tradition and sense of tradition does continue. Henry James not only created *The Turn of the Screw* for a Christmas issue of *Collier’s* magazine, but he also frames it as a story told at Christmas to a gathering ‘in an old house’, and that a story told in such a situation ‘should essentially be’ gruesome.\(^3\) Similarly, Susan Hill’s 1983 homage to the Victorian ghost story, and to *The Turn of the Screw* in particular, *The Woman in Black*, begins with the telling of ghost stories at a family Christmas. One character claims that this is ‘Just the thing for Christmas Eve. It’s an ancient tradition!’\(^4\) (Hill, 2011, p.14) It is this telling of fictional tales within an established tradition which inspires the narrator to set down his memories of his encounter with the vengeful spirit of the title. It is also this tradition which means that we are attuned to the idea of the country house as a particular place for the supernatural, especially at Christmas.

These narratives were still intended to disturb, particularly, and famously, in *The Turn of the Screw*, where that turn is itself a reference to the the additional effect of horror brought on by having not just one child involved in a ghost story, but two.\(^5\) And their adaptations can still be disturbing, with the appropriate approach and material. (Hands up who has been disturbed or scared by the stage, TV or film version of *The Woman in Black.*\(\) However, at the same time the presence of a ghost in a country house in a film or a television production is practically to be expected, rather than a surprise. This is hardly new; John C.Tibbetts has stated that ‘Ever since the ghost of Hamlet's father stalked the battlements of Elsinore castle, the stock in trade of horror romanticism has consisted of the inhabitants, properties and atmosphere of the haunted house.\(^6\) We have only to think of Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey* and her expectation, and desire, that the Abbey would conform to her expectations derived from Gothic novels, of secrets and hidden horrors, which drive her to imagine terrible things despite the Abbey’s bright, modern actuality.


\(^5\) James, 1984, p.145

It is brightness and modernity which are typically seen as the reasons why the traditional ghost story has lost its power. Modernity here includes a perceived turn to rationalism, as the superstitions of the past as represented by the ghost story are discarded or reinterpreted. Thus, Margaret Oliphant could begin her 1880 Christmas ghost story ‘Earthbound: A Story of the Seen and the Unseen’ by referring to ‘The commonplace ghost-stories which are among the ordinary foolishnesses of Christmas’ and which were losing their favour amongst the younger folk in favour of tales of spiritualism, which relied more on evidence of eyewitnesses. But it is also the development of modern domestic comforts and conveniences that have been seen as challenging the traditional ghost story. As a writer in the Manchester Guardian in 1923 put it, ‘Perhaps it is the modern sophisticated ghost story that has killed the more primitive one of old, unless the passing of the Yule log also has something to do with it. You could not sit around the gas fire, or the anthracite stove, to tell ghost stories on Christmas Eve.’

What the haunted country house does for us now is to provide us with a safe distance from these hauntings, particularly if there is a period setting to allow for the return of the atmosphere of candlelight and fire-glow. While Victorian middle-class readers may have enjoyed reading about the intrusions of crimes and horrors into their familiar domestic, such tales typically served as warnings against behaviour that was against the values of that class, emphasising domesticity and family, for example. At the same time, there was also a safety to be found in the tale of horrors which took place in the past, suggesting that these things could not be in the here and now. And the passing of time has its own effects. Tales which once showed the irruption of the abnormal into the present day, if kept in their original setting are now quaint stories of a superstitious past, keeping the supernatural in its correct place as haunting Gothic piles, Victorian homes, and country houses.

And so the idea of the ghost story belonging to a particular time and place works both ways. Having become familiar with the idea that a Victorian setting frequently means a story containing the supernatural, particularly when associated with particular signals which indicate the genre, audiences begin to expect the supernatural, or are at least not surprised when it turns up. Indeed, they may sense an absence when it turns out that there is no ghost, no mad woman in the attic, no colonial curse playing out. This is largely what I mean by the idea of the supernatural being consoling, that it provides the comfort of delivering the expected.

This includes the development of the idea that the ghost story is appropriate to particular times, and to particular modes of expression. For example, the ghost story at Christmas, which presents that time of the year as being particularly appropriate to the engagement with mortality and morality which are so central to the genre. I have already mentioned the literary history of this tradition, but this has also been developed in other media, with radio and television picking up on the idea. On television, in particular, there was the fondly remembered series called A Ghost Story for Christmas which ran for most of the 1970s, incorporating adaptations of Dickens and M.R.James alongside a couple of later, original pieces into one-off dramas that appeared

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7 Oliphant, Margaret, ‘Earthbound: A Story of the Seen and the Unseen’, The Living Age, 111: 1861, 1880, pp.404-405
annually. The identity of this series as focussing on M.R.James adaptations was retained when it was revived on BBC4 in 2008 and 2009 for two new James tales, and again in 2013 by Mark Gatiss for BBC2.

Consolation, however, can also come in other ways. One of the consolations of these domestic horrors, particularly those limited to remote country houses, is that they represent horrors as contained. Certainly, these tormented families can be understood as representing society in miniature, their problems can be read as society’s at large, the ghosts that haunt them those of our collective past as much as the specific past of the narrative. But the confinement of these narratives to one isolated location makes it much easier to perceive the story as simply a story, a little chiller for the night, representing specific events happening to specific people, people who are not real. After all, it’s not as if such things could really happen, could they? And if they did, it would only be to people living in remote country houses, probably some time in the past.

This is where it is interesting to examine works set in the present in relation to these ideas of consolation. A brief survey of the reception of contemporary-set ghost stories points to them being seen as more troubling than any Victorian ghost adaptation, and so less acceptable. Most notable, of course, is Stephen Volk’s *Ghostwatch*, which effectively killed original, contemporary horror on mainstream British television at Halloween for the following two decades. Infamous for being the only programme to have been written up in the *British Medical Journal* for being responsible for two cases of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and for contributing to the suicide of one disturbed individual, the drama inspired vocal audience responses that were dominated by those who felt aggrieved that a public service broadcaster should seek to ‘fool’ them that the drama was real. This despite the programme being shown in a drama slot, trailed as a drama, introduced as a drama with an opening *Screen One* title sequence, having a cast list on-screen and in the *Radio Times*, and so on. Viewers on BBC’s *Biteback* and *Points of View* claimed that the modern setting made the production more ‘sinister’, and that this modern, urban setting and use of familiar television faces had some who knew that the production was a drama wondering if, actually, it just might be real.

*Ghostwatch* is a special case, with its live documentary broadcast form predicting the style of programmes such as *Most Haunted*, although arguably it’s simply updating the documentary, first person accounts of many Victorian and Edwardian ghost and horror stories, such as those of M.R.James, or *Frankenstein*, or *Dracula*. However, *Ghostwatch* is also clearly not alone in being a modern ghost story that disturbed more than one set in the past. Nigel Kneale felt that one of the reasons for the success of his plays in terms of actually scaring people was that ‘the strangest things ought to happen in the most ordinary of places. If a monster appears in an everyday place, it’s much more frightening that in some Gothic castle where you would expect it to be.’ This was his reason for putting his horrors in the present, and also the reason why broadcasters both desired and distrusted them. For example, following the horrified response to Kneale’s adaptation of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, he was told by a member of BBC staff that the BBC did not like the fact that it was controversial, and that they really

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wanted programmes that ‘would cause no trouble nor attract attention. Not too good, and not too bad, but in the middle...’\textsuperscript{11} We may pause here to consider how many other programmes from 1954 are still being written and talked about, and are eagerly desired for commercial release.

One of the key factors at play here is the notion of 'good taste'. A supernatural tale that focuses on horror will show the nasty things that are meant to disturb the audience, while one that operates more by suggestion and the imagination, based in terror, will tend to be considered to be more tasteful. In part, this is down to the notion that subtlety cannot be understood and appreciated by the less-cultured, so horror tales must be for the lower classes, although the members of the lower classes must obviously be protected from the corrupting influence of these horror stories. The tale of terror, meanwhile, required an understanding of subtlety and suggestion, and so could be appreciated on this level, although a narrative about the 'real world' would surely be a better use of the writer's talents... Similarly, while Kneale repeatedly declared himself as against the graphic displays of horror and in favour of the subtlety of terror, by placing his horrors into a recognisable modernity he made them more 'real', in the same way as displaying them. Even the supposed future setting of Nineteen Eighty-Four drew heavily on the recognisable present of bomb-damaged London in presenting itself as horribly familiar and close to home, and so relevant to the modern audience.

So the urban and modern is too familiar, too close to mundane reality so that we fear any intrusions of the supernatural into it. But the country house fiction is familiar but at a distance, familiar through mediation rather than through lived experience. It is already, for most people, a heritage fantasy, and one where visitors to country houses are frequently thrilled by displays of horrifying weaponry and stories of family tragedies, and family ghosts. Country houses are places where the past bleeds into the present. Like Catherine Morland, we are disappointed if there are no mysterious passages, no dark tales of horrors past, no rumours of spectral apparitions. This applies to our country houses in literature and media as well, particularly those with a more Gothic appearance, or presentation. The lonelier, the emptier, the darker, the better.

But even this is not necessary. I’ll conclude with a brief consideration of the first Downton Abbey Christmas episode. Amongst the hubbub of a family Christmas, with various guests and the usual connivances and troubles upstairs and down, the servants use a ouija board, firstly to trick poor Daisy. But later poor, innocent Daisy and saintly Anna, both probably the most trustworthy and least likely to play a trick characters in the show, use the ouija, and it seems to spell out a message from Matthew’s dead wife that he should feel free to marry Lady Mary. All of which passed almost entirely unnoted in British reviews; after all, this is a country house in the Edwardian era and it is a Christmas special, so a bit of ghostly activity is perfectly in place. American reviewers, however, all seemed to pick up on this as something odd, particularly the reviewer for Fashion magazine, who termed the ouija board ‘Best Halloween (struck through) Christmas Prop’.

\textsuperscript{11} Quoted in Andy Murray, \textit{Into the Unknown: The Fantastic Life of Nigel Kneale}, London: Headpress, 2006, p.47
So the comfortable nature of the supernatural in the country house depends on various expectations and certain framing. Cultural differences can lead to a misinterpretation, and so that disconnect which separates the supernatural and the heritage drama, despite the importance of the supernatural to many of the writers that heritage drama derives from. But when all is in place, the appearance of a ghost in a spooky old house in the country, well, it’s just to be expected, isn’t it?