The uncanny place: a critical appraisal of popular paranormal TV shows.

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The Uncanny Place: A Critical Appraisal of Popular Paranormal TV Shows

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Abstract

This article examines the construction of the uncanny place in reality paranormal television. Two introductory sequences from the British programme Most Haunted *(2002-present) are analysed that investigate 'ordinary homes' to consider the way that place is framed. Using textual analysis, the content of these sequences, including visual, auditory and discursive signifiers, are considered to identify themes where the inversion of the ordinary and the destabilising of homeliness emerged. The use of binary oppositions and representations of liminality are identified as frequent tropes in the production of reality paranormal television. It is argued that these elements frame places as potentially uncanny and invite the viewers to participate in the paranormal possibility of the home. The uncanny, it is concluded, forms an integral part of the narratives that construct reality paranormal programmes and their success at sustaining an engaged and exploratory audience.*

Keywords: uncanny, haunted, supernatural, liminality, mediation, construction

Introduction

Imagination augments the values of reality (Bachelard 1994: 1).

This article seeks to examine the sense of place as it is framed in reality paranormal television programmes. Structure, narrative and legend-telling in these texts have been explored and discussed by other authors (for example, Koven 2007). This article, however, considers the paranormal place as a signifier of the uncanny through the identification of binary oppositions in the texts including presence/absence, ordinary/uncanny, light/dark, amateur/professional, medium/parapsychologist. Unlike Marc Augé's (1994) non-places, or the large homogenous spaces of super-modernity, spaces from the historical past are inscribed with layers of architectural change and social narrative disruption. Paranormal reality television programmes draw upon the past to frame their investigation of reputedly haunted spaces and imbue these places with uncanny potential. Like other lifestyle genres, paranormal texts are formed around key structures with little variation from episode to episode and text to text (Lacey 2000; Feuer 1992). The television programme *Most Haunted* (2002–present), for example, is constructed in a similar way to *Escape to the Country* (2002-present), a house-hunting, lifestyle programme, although the latter idealises the countryside rather than presenting it with a gothic filter. The opening titles of the show contain a pastiche montage of horror and uncanny aural and visual signifiers (liminal spaces, gothic architecture, moonlight, night-visuals) and become metonymic for the supernatural and the haunted past. However, in no way is this to be confused with history but rather seen as a historical simulacrum (Baudrillard 1994), where the mediation itself obliterates historical ontology. To frame our analysis, we draw upon the uncanny or unheimlich, as Freud ([1919] 2003) defines the term – of things that are not of the home and are physically, ontologically,

or epistemically out of place (Hayward, Wooffitt and Woods 2015). Freud posits that, rather than the uncanny drawing on the unfamiliar, it is presented as familiar, such as in the repetition of something previously experienced. So, the concept of the phantasm is uncanny because it is familiar and interrogates human form in popular folklore and other narratives. By drawing on the uncanny, this article questions how reality paranormal programmes frame places as potentially uncanny and in what ways they engage viewers in the paranormal potential of the home.

First popularised through texts such as *MTV's Fear* (2000–02) in the United States and the United Kingdom's *Most Haunted*, reality paranormal programmes seemingly document people visiting reputedly haunted places to experience uncanny events. *Most Haunted*, the focus of this study, is one of the longest-running paranormal reality shows, attracting a considerable viewing audience in the United Kingdom during its television broadcast (2002-19) and recent streaming through the *Most Haunted* Youtube channel (2019-present). The format inspired countless other shows, including *Ghost Hunters* (2004-present), *Ghost Adventures* (2008– present) and *Help my House is Haunted* (2018–present), all of which follow a group of investigators as they seek to document and establish through spiritual and scientific practice, the existence of ghosts. Importantly, the investigations presented in these paranormal texts are framed as 'real' and the locations that feature in them often become associated, by proxy, as sites of supernatural interest for viewers (Edwards 2019). While paranormal action is the key commercial driver, it is *the place* that is central to each episode, and this is foregrounded in the first few minutes of the opening as the presenters establish the location and key narrative highlights. This article considers the uncanny framing of place within these types of programmes by conducting textual analysis on the introductions of two different texts. We analyse two opening sequences from different episodes of *Most Haunted*, the TV series broadcast on the commercial channels Living (Sky)

and Really (Freeview). As the research focused on the Freudian concept of the *unheimlich* or uncanny, episodes were selected based on the fact that the 'ordinary' home was featured in the investigations rather than military installations or civic buildings. This was because we wished to focus on the nature of how the house (which in general is regarded as safe and secure) was framed with uncanny signification. The two episodes selected for discussion here focus on the 'ordinary' home – ''30 East Drive'' (2015) and 'Lower Southwood Cottage' (2005). A broad form of textual analysis was carried out which involved examining the visual and aural aspects of the narratives and also the presenter-expert discourse. We systematically recorded the types and sizes of shots, camera angles, edits, lighting, soundtrack including effects and music. Themes, such as the inversion of the 'ordinary' and the de-stabilising of homeliness, emerged clearly from the texts and these are explained and discussed below. The analysis suggests that the uncanny is constructed semiotically through the transformation of the ordinary to the extraordinary where the Brechtian concept of *Verfremdung,* or the act of making the familiar, strange, is evident. Further, the uncanny was represented not solely in the aesthetic mode but also in the discursive mode, particularly in the storytelling by the presenter and additionally in the discourses of the experts (local historians, parapsychologists and mediums) and, through these discourses, the viewer was integrally interlinked with the construction of the uncanny. A detailed analysis of these text follows.

'30 East Drive'

The episode, '30 East Drive', starts with opening shots of the flowers in the front garden and proceeds quickly to a 360-degree tour through the house. Point-of-view (POV) shots mimetically represent the viewer as we are encouraged to explore the house. We are not

permitted to linger in any of the rooms as the shots are combined through rapid editing, a technique that both accelerates time to ensure that the programme meets the time allotted to it and conveys the impression that the viewer is situated in a space that is dimensionally fluid. We are aware of certain features such as artex ceilings and mirrors and liminal spaces which offer no sense of permanency. Corners offer no security but rather suggestions of unexpectedness as we do not know what may be around them. The aesthetics of how home is represented and navigated in reality paranormal texts generally positions the uncanny in liminal spaces. Corridors, corners, stairways, doorways, and mirrors feature continuously when these texts attempt to establish place. As Gaston Bachelard (1994:138) states, 'the corner is a chamber of being [...]' (Bachelard 1994: 138) and, unlike the corridor, which is transitional, gives a sense of permanency. Corridors, conversely, are places for passing through: a connecting space from one place to another or one dimension to another. Corridors and corners feature prominently when reality paranormal texts attempt to establish place. Further, corridors have often been used within horror and psychological texts as transitional spaces to show how characters are isolated or lost, such as in Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) or Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980) (Luckhurs, 2019). In these types of genres, corners can be not only permanent but also claustrophobic as the sense of being backed into a corner makes it more difficult to escape.

One of the most explicit references to the horror genre is the use of the slow, upward panning shot as the stairs in '30 East Drive' are reached. The *Most Haunted* presenter has already prepared the audience, offering suggestions in her discourse that allows the visual aesthetics to lead to the inevitable jump scare. Staircases are significant as they ascend and descend, connecting other liminal spaces, and feature regularly within reality paranormal texts. For example, the title sequence for *Most Haunted* uses staircases as a signifier for 'nowhere'. It is an indeterminate signifier. Hitchcock used stairs in his films to convey the

transition from the conscious to the unconscious realms where characters were led to confront their fears. As Yacowar (2009) states, 'stairs compel movement and with it, fear'. Stairs, like corridors, have other spaces leading off from them to places that are potentially unfamiliar and therefore unsettling (Luckhurst 2019). Liminality conveys the uncanny through its familiar visual rendering and as such is a central aspect within the recurring narratives about the paranormal.

The presenter continues to establish the supernatural 'presence' through her discourse that becomes almost tangible in the viewer's hybrid state of engagement and distantiation. In this narrative, she refers to the binary oppositions of the 'usual' investigation undertaken by the programme and this one. The 'usual' is comprised of old manors and castles but this, this is an 'average' home: 'An average looking house, average looking street, average town'. The subsequent repetitive use of the possessive case in the following underlines the possibility of this being representative of the viewer's ontological reality: 'It could be *your* home, the bedrooms could be *your* bedrooms, the living room could be *your* living room', and then, in case the viewer is left in any doubt, 'the activity in this home could happen in *yours*' (our emphasis). The choice of the word 'home' rather than 'house' is also conscious in the construction of the uncanny, underlining the familiar and secure. The upward panning shot reveals the presenter and not a ghostly presence (albeit she appears to be deathly pale) standing at the top of the stairs. This is a parallel that could be aligned to Hitchcock's work in *Psycho*, where we see perhaps the most significant example of the use of stairs as Norman Bates ascends to his attic where the repressed memories of his childhood reside and then later with the murder of Arbogast at the top of the stairs in the *Psycho* house and Hitchcock uses one of the most memorable jump scares in cinematic history. In '30 East Drive', the camera angles create a self-reflexive imposing view of the presenter. The establishment of place in this episode is determined by the mode of documentary realism and storytelling which is

apparently factual. She says: 'As soon as we started filming, activity started all around us. We have taken the decision to show a Piece-To-Camera (PTC) that has no explanation […]'.

In this episode, the audience 'sees' paranormal activity in real time rather than in reportage. A marble seems to shoot out of the wall behind the cameraman. Filming continues in an impromptu manner – the realism is 'unproduced'. We hear the interruption rather than see it and the presenter points and says, 'did you see that?' Both the presenter and crew recreate the moment in order to replicate the sound of the marble hitting the wall. In this discourse, the 'uncanny' is represented not in an aesthetic way but in a discursive way. The binary opposition between what should have happened and what did happen amplifies the uncanny, the extraordinary. Furthermore, the use of 'that' as an identifier of the phenomena signifies an ambiguity and potentially transgressive quality to the experience (Hayward, Wooffitt & Woods 2015). The audience is invited to discover what 'that' might be.

The section of the programme following this point has been edited in post-production as it contains a sequence of negatively exposed images of a selection of ordinary items which reinforces visually the idea that this could be a viewer's house. One of these items is a child's doll, a key signifier of the uncanny in its representation of a human. There are several references to childhood (the marble, a doll's pram). The corruption of these signifiers by placing them out of a conventional context inverts the meaning of childhood, and this is a trope frequently used in horror texts. As Leeder (2013) examines in relation to the infamous *Ghostwatch*, aired in 1992, the use of childhood items (like dolls) disrupts a sense of comfort and security for the viewers by playing on Freud's notions of the uncanny and imbuing something familiar with unnatural and frightening qualities. While the camera pans over these objects, the voice-over tells the story of the family who lived in the house. Time folds in on itself in order to provide further layers of uncanny effects. Binary oppositions are used

repeatedly as the narrative told by the presenter refers to the hope and excitement experienced by the new owners when they were ready to move into the house in the mid-60s. The story conveys hope for the future which is lost, and this is expressed by a narrative and vocal cadence: 'terror lay in wait for them'.

The accompanying visuals for this story are shown as the camera pans over everyday objects and picks up the ordinariness of the artex ceiling and the salmon pink shade on the ceiling light. It is lit by bright sunlight, which contrasts strongly with the dark narrative. As the presenter continues the explanation of the paranormal activity, images are intercut of an 'ordinary' street, a cyclist, a bus stop. The juxtaposition of the everyday images and the extraordinary horrific account serves to underline the contrast of the real and the unreal, the ordinary and the extraordinary.

The uncanny is further conveyed in several shots that follow. There is a mirror that reflects a smaller, round mirror but also an expanse of wall – this suggests the potential presence of something unseen. In some horror or fantasy texts, as well as fairy-tales, mirrors have supernatural qualities, being seen as transformative as well as portals to other dimensions or prisons for miscreants (Joosen 2011; Melchior-Bonnet 2014; Goodall 2016). Another use of a mirror reflecting the stairs and empty landing fulfils the same purpose later on. The absence of something noticeable denotes a suggestion of a *potential* presence, thereby providing an opportunity for viewers to see or experience paranormal activity themselves to ensure deeper engagement.

Several images of religious icons, such as a Roman Catholic statue of a saint and child, and shots of the exterior and a well-tended garden and front door create a jarring effect as the narrative continues to explain the violent activity that has been witnessed in the house. The voice-over narrates the story of the kinetic manifestation that propels the present occupant of the house upstairs and leaves marks on her throat. This violence is described

over an aerial shot of the town, which again conveys ordinariness as it shows rows of well-kept but uniform houses and gardens.

The shot moves to a bedroom with a child's pink toy pram, which is the only childhood signifier in the room. This isolated symbol of childhood is designed to emphasise the uncanny. It seems out of place in this room as this is not a child's bedroom but rather an ordinary adult bedroom. As with nearly all of these episodes, the use of superlatives is frequent. This location is described as the place that houses 'the most violent poltergeist in the world'.

'Lower Southwood Cottage'

All of the *Most Haunted* episodes follow the same tightly scripted format, which ironically is used to orientate and settle the audience into a familiar pattern. Following the usual opening titles, which seek to promise another helping of spooky fare, the establishment of place begins in 'Lower Southwood Cottage' with a narrative about the house and its history, who lives there and what their experiences are. This section of the text is particularly significant because it provides an indication of what is to come and helps the viewer to decide whether they want to continue viewing. The presenter announces the location, which is framed as a mid-shot of the charming cottage and its surrounding gardens in the bright daylight. This again uses a strong binary framing and a familiar trope of situating a dark narrative in a bright quotidian world (Douchet 2009). As she establishes the conventional nature of the building, she turns and disappears through a slow dissolve fade edit. For greater validity, there is a cutaway to the present owner, who voices his experiences as an 'eyewitness'. The use of this term positions intertextually his testimony with the legitimacy of journalistic documentary. He mentions poltergeist activity where tables and other furniture are found in disarray and

knifes are seen sticking upwards unnaturally out of a bread board. The terms 'scary' and 'frightening' are used repeatedly. The parapsychologist's discourse, in contrast, adopts a rationale tone. The reported experiences are categorised and explained to the viewer, and alternative explanations are offered. Rationality is, however, contrasted with irrationality in the discourse as the parapsychologist compares the ordinary experience (which may have a rationale or alternative explanation) with the extraordinary circumstances of this case. For instance, he suggests that (in contrast to a normal poltergeist case):

> […] the interesting thing about this is it is not just focused around one particular member of the family. It appears to be happening to the grandmother, also the mother, and also now the children to some extent, and because of this generational difference I think parapsychologists would logically argue it's not so much a PK energy but maybe more of a spirit energy that we are looking at.

Visuals are created to illustrate and reinforce the description of the activity, and these are filmed in black and white with vertical lines superimposed that appear to crackle across the screen connoting supernatural energy. Not one but at least three if not more ghosts are referred to in the opening sequence as if delivering the promised and anticipated added value of this particular episode. Other visuals used to connote the uncanny include the close-up, canted angle shot of a door in black and white with the same vertical lines again superimposed on the image. The use of these stylised aesthetics along with the rapid and frenetic editing convey a sense of the unordinary in this ordinary setting that resembles the early German Expressionist cinema witnessed in films such as *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (Wiene, 1920) and *Genuine* (Wiene, 1920). In these texts, frequent use of an explicit,

stylised mise-en-scène complete with angular splinters painted on the floor and sets that defied architectural logic were commonplace to provide an otherworldliness effect.

Aurally, the presenter, herself an actress, uses phrasing and emphasis to add dramatic effect. Her narration style is contrasted with the other contributors (local historian, medium, parapsychologist) and appropriates a journalistic tone. The episode soundtrack is ambient, featuring atonal qualities as well as a lack of temporal structure. The background music incorporates a variety of noises which contribute to the unsettling effect of the visual material. A contrast could be made between this type of soundtrack and for example the modernist soundtrack added at the New York premiere of *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* in 1921 which included excerpts from, and references to, the radical atonal and asymmetrical compositions of Schoenberg and Stravinsky (Hubbert 2005). However, this radicalisation of musical composition established by these types of composers in the early twentieth century is only loosely referenced in reality paranormal texts, as postmodern pastiche (Jameson 1991) to achieve psychological dissonance in the viewer. Throughout the *Most Haunted* episodes, the soundtrack includes synthesised, ambient sound to disconcert the audience, the intensity of which increases as certain key points to convey tension.

As the presenter relocates to another area of the house to continue the narrative, a long shot is used where she is established at the end of a corridor. The walls and ceiling are painted a warm yellow colour and the lighting rig is located in front of her but hidden behind a beam. This serves to exaggerate her shadow, which appears projected onto the wall directly behind her and suggests connotatively that she is being observed and followed by a dark shadow. At this point, as in the case of '30 East Drive'*,* she talks about the ghost of a child, in this case, a small girl who whispers and moves toys about and of a man in an RAF uniform.

The discursive tone of this particular episode is that of the *assertive saviour,* a discourse usually found more prolifically in the American reality paranormal texts. We are told repeatedly that the occupants of the house have called the *Most Haunted* team in to investigate and help them. After establishing that this is a 'family home like any other', the presenter asks, 'can we help to end the reign of terror that exists at Lower Southwood Cottage?' and states that 'the owners felt compelled to call in the *Most Haunted* crew'. The uncanny frame is set through the self-reflexive questions posed by the presenter. She is interlocutor and, she, herself, mediates between the location and the audience asking the questions on behalf of the viewer.

'Why is this cottage dominated by varied and often violent tales of poltergeist behaviour?'

'Having answered this family's call [...] can we assist those who live here?'

 and,

'It's really exciting because this family has called us in to investigate their property[…]'

The presentation of the cottage in time-lapse photography shows no respect for time as we fast forward from dawn to dusk in order to allow the ghost hunters to get to work. The reinforcement of 'ordinariness' is further established by the local historian, who states that the cottage is the *most* incredible place that *Most Haunted* has been to. 'People have no axe to grind and do not sell haunted weekends. They are not open to the public […]'. The

implication is that these people are like the viewers and that they haven't done anything wrong, so why are they victims of the spirit world? The accompanying visuals pan across the length of the cottage where the dark windows punctuate the characteristic red brickwork, foregrounding and contrasting the explicit ordinariness of the exterior with the mysterious and unknowable interior. The historian continues to underline the validity of the expert team as he reinforces the 'saviour' discourse by explaining to the viewers that the *Most Haunted* crew is there to provide a service to help the owners find out about and make peace with their ghosts.

Paranormal Place and De-stabilising Heimlich

Place is an important aspect of paranormal reality shows and is positioned at the heart of each episode as the history, experiences and uncanny possibilities of each location are explored. As Edwards (2019) recognises, the viewers' knowledge and understanding of ghosts, and the places they inhabit, is transformed and curated through their engagement with paranormal media. In the two episodes analysed, the 'ordinary' home is positioned alongside, and in opposition to, its significance as a paranormal place. In attempting to express our relationship with our houses, Bachelard says, '[…] our house is our corner of the world' (1994: 4) – something that implies safety and familiarity. However, our engagement with the mediated space in paranormal texts is designed to destabilise this sense of peace and security. Ghosts are brought into the domestic space of the home through the television, but also potentially through the unseen corners of our homes that may be inhabited by ghosts. They remind us that, as much as ghosts are associated with the 'unheimlich' (or unhomely), they are also a familiar feature of the home. Throughout history, ghostly activity has been associated with houses: the haunting of the Fox Sisters in 1848 (which inspired the Spiritualist movement)

occurred on the family farm in Hydesville, and in 1974 a disruptive negative haunting was blamed for the tragedy that surrounded the Lutz family in their Amityville home. The haunted house is a common cultural narrative, and the invasion of the home by uncanny events has been the inspiration for numerous television programmes (*The Exorcist* [2016-17], *American Horror Story – Murder House* [2011], *The Haunting of Hill House* [2018]). If, as Freud (1919 [2003]) suggests, the uncanny can be understood in relation to 'everything that was intended to remain secret, hidden away, and has come into the open' (132), paranormal texts engage us in the discovery of the hidden, and the potential for it to exist within our own homes.

While shadows have their place in reality paranormal texts, it is the location of the uncanny in the bright sunlight of day that creates one of the most unsettling effects in the episodes examined. Alfred Hitchcock used this technique in many of his films (most notably *Psycho* but also *The Birds* [1964] where he twisted the narrative to establish contrastingly the dark elements of the human condition within the bright, quotidian world [Douchet 2009)]). As mentioned previously, the framing of meaning in '30 East Drive' and 'Lower Southwood Cottage' is established initially in binary opposition to *Escape to the Country,* another reality show but one which idealises place as somewhere representing a haven or a desirable and secure place to live. However, both episodes examined here are distinct from many others in the *Most Haunted* series for several reasons: they use contrasts to demonstrate the idea that nightmarish, supernatural experiences can be found not within dark spaces but everyday places, like semis in suburbia or rural cottages, and attempt to incorporate real-time paranormal activity *on camera in the home* to prove scientifically that other dimensions of reality do exist. They attempt, therefore, to re-establish a frame of scientific rationality on chaotic and largely inexplicable actions.

To compensate for our lack of presence or literal placement in the 'haunted' space and through mediation, the place itself becomes objectified; an extra that is clothed and staged as a phantasy or an exaggeration of itself, to engage the viewer. In reality paranormal texts, the ordinary is encoded, which allows viewers to relate to the text as 'reality' but positions the audience in relation to the hyper-real representation of place as they consume it. This, at one and the same time, causes them to feel closely involved with but also distanced from the spectacle.

In addition to their role as paranormal consumers, viewers of reality paranormal texts are invited, by the producers, to identify with and contribute to the invocation of the unseen phantasm, acting as hosts by facilitating the transmission of the uncanny. In this way, the audience and the producers are complicit in the co-construction of the uncanny spectacle in that they are positioned in between rationality and irrationality. There is strong binary opposition in the text in terms of the tension between parapsychology (which is established as being more rational and legitimate in the overall discourse) and that of mediumship (which is based on intuition and feeling – things that are not scientifically observable or measurable). Furthermore, actors in these texts draw upon devices and activities to invoke communication with spirits familiar with both the spiritualist era of the late 1800s/ early 1900s (séances, Ouija boards, mediumistic abilities), and the pseudo-scientific practices of modern-day ghost hunters believed to capture 'physical' proof of spirit activity (EMF meters, REM pods, full-spectrum cameras). This juxtaposition between the rational and irrational is observed by other scholars (see Bainbridge 2007; Nunn and Biressi 2013), who point to its ability to undermine notions of rational truth, and in doing so unsettle the viewer's sense of self and their own mortality. As Walter (2013) describes, a 'Frankenstein's Monster' is created through the stitching together of elements of rationality and irrationality, which propel the audience through a disquieting viewing experience, a 'revolving door of scepticism in paranormal

claims and mediated realities, and at the same time [are invited to] consider the possibility of belief in Spiritism, mediums and hauntings' (Hill 2011: 171). Viewers are not then passive in reality paranormal texts but rather through the subjectivity of their own experience co-create the uncanny qualities of the spaces they inhabit - the 'Unheimliches Haus' or *uncanny house* is both a feature and product of reality paranormal television.

The uncanny as a trope used in production

The paranormal texts fit within the wider genre of reality television but draw heavily on the horror genre and its sub-classification of psychological horror. The antecedents of film and televisual representations of the uncanny are to be found in the literary narrative but visually these are most often located in German Expressionist art and film. The classical German Expressionist films of the early twentieth century coincided with Freud's publication of his seminal paper on the uncanny. For example, *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*, mentioned above, is regarded as one of the first horror films and draws heavily on psychoanalysis and scientific rationality, particularly in its controversial ending that explains that the protagonist's story is the ramblings of a psychiatric patient rather than a lucid narrator recounting a series of fantastic events. Recurring themes of paranoia and fractured subjectivity are conveyed through a complex mise-en-scène which uses strong chiaroscuro lighting, splintered effects on the painted scenery, fantasy buildings that sag and a modernist soundtrack.

Reality paranormal texts draw on a variety of different cinematic and televisual styles, including Expressionism and psychological realism favoured by directors like Alfred Hitchcock and the new wave French directors such as Francois Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard and Claude Chabrol. Camera angles such as the Dutch tilt or extreme close-up which are

used to unsettle the viewer are frequently used in programmes like *Most Haunted*, *Ghost Adventures* (2008-present), *Great British Ghosts* (2011-12). Dutch tilt or canted angle shots are ways of conveying that the elements in the frame are off-centre and that there is something unsettling about the characters, their intentions or their pasts. Panning shots which are low-angled, as evidenced in '30 East Drive', are also used to convey the unexpected, and jump-cuts in editing are used to thrill the audience in the same way that Hitchcock used these devices in some of his films – most notably, *Psycho*. Physically distant shots are also ubiquitous in these paranormal texts, located in the analysis of both '30 East Drive' and 'Lower Southwood Cottage', where viewers are paradoxically positioned as emotionally distant and engaged at the same time. These shots (wide-angle, telephoto) often withhold detail of a small subject which appears buried in the background context which viewers are drawn to, such as the small figure by the bridge that is partially obscured by the reeds growing by the river in *The Innocents* (Clayton, 1961).[1] The viewer scans the image and then identifies the indistinct figure but is denied enough detail to provide understanding relating to who or what the figure is. Is the figure a ghost? In his analysis, Derek Johnston (2018: 108) also observes the significance of the panning, and obscured, landscape shot in engaging the viewer with a growing sense of unease depicted in the opening scenes of the *Ghost Story for Christmas* series (1971 - 1978). This technique is used frequently in the establishment of the location and narrative in the introductions to reality paranormal texts. However, the actual sighting of a ghost cannot be guaranteed in *Most Haunted,* therefore the text constructs a mood/aesthetic that provides a visual and psychological space for the audience to imagine infinite possibilities of 'ghostliness' while drawing on their understanding of previous constructions of the uncanny: intertextual signifiers.

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[1] Based on the Henry James novella *The Turn of the Screw* (1898).

The production of liminality also features heavily in the two texts examined. Ghosts, by their nature, are liminal in form. They seem to occupy an 'in-between' state of being, both living and dead, here and there, past and present, seen and unseen. In contrast to the house, a physical and immovable entity, the liminality of ghosts creates a transitional and unknowable place. As Lipman (2014) explores, ghostly experiences within the home most often occur in those places that encourage movement and transition. Spaces such as corridors, stairways, windows and doorways. Indeed, Waskul and Waskul (2016) reflect on the frequency of ghostly experiences in liminal spaces as 'truly uncanny' (86). In both '30 East Drive' and 'Lower Southwood Cottage', visual indicators of liminality are common in production as panning shots past empty windows and open doorways, as well as long shots down corridors and up stairwells. The liminal nature of the ghostly experience reported is also heightened discursively in reference to their temporal dimensions between both past and present.

Furthermore, the television, like the mirrors and paintings reported in Lipman's (2014) study, can become a liminal object for viewers as they inhabit a transitional space where they leave one place (the familiarity of home), and are transitioned (although not fully) somewhere else (that is unfamiliar). While the viewer remains at home. they are enticed into a space where they are encouraged to engage with phenomena that are presented as extra-sensory and liminality is playfully signified through production techniques and scripted performance. The participatory nature of ghost-hunting television invites the viewers into other places, while at the same time bringing other places into the home (Williams, 2013). The television becomes itself a focus of the liminal uncanny, a transitional place where the familiar unfamiliar is played out for the viewer.

Conclusion

This article explored the uncanny place and how it is constructed in reality paranormal programming. The uncanny may be said to form an integral part of these narratives where the sense of place is explicitly drawn around key archetypal characters and the use of repeated visual and aural tropes such as long shots, dolly zoom effects and dissolve fade edits. The use of binary oppositions present in the aesthetics and discourse of the *Most Haunted* text causes the viewer to be unsettled. The sense of ordinariness is juxtaposed against the extraordinary (even the frightening) through the visualisation of the 'ordinary home' against the 'extraordinary' accounts of paranormal claims. Further, the theme of sight is also foregrounded as a binary opposition and the connotations of seeing and not seeing are prevalent in the visual narrative. The visual icons represented in the production of the show contrast a sense of safety, familiarity and reassurance (childhood toys, religious symbols, the suburban town) with a feeling of uncertainty, fear and the unknown. Arguably, as Leeder (2013) observes, the representation of symbols such as childhood items are disruptive and purposeful, and in the home imbue a sense of unfamiliarity and uncanny potential.

This article also examined how the construction of reality paranormal programmes, such as *Most Haunted*, play with liminality in their representation of time and place within the home. Corridors, stairways, windows and doorways are common visual tropes, and time lacks a consistent sensibility as the programme jumps between time-lapses and adjoins the past and present. These liminal spaces also invite the viewer to be a participant in the co-creation of their viewing experience. The television acts as a transitional space that mediates between the viewer and another place, and, as such, there is the potential to see and experience something paranormal which is heightened by the liminal spaces represented. The viewer is invited to question: is something extraordinary about to happen? Is there a presence

or not? Will they see something not visible to the crew? Indeed, the participatory nature of reality paranormal programmes is a significant factor in the co-construction of the uncanny. Like the ghosts these programmes claim to pursue, the uncanny is not easy to frame or represent and rather relies on the presentation of familiar signifiers to feed the audience's imagination. Liminality is important in achieving this, constructing a transitional space in which the 'arm-chair ghost-hunter' is transported to an uncanny place where a ghostly potential can be mediated through the screen.

In many ways, the construction of the uncanny through reality paranormal programmes reflects a postmodern paradigm. Ironically, the ghost, which is traditionally imbued with history and meaning, is playfully deconstructed and reconstituted in these programmes to fit a range of narratives and opportunities. The places, or homes, as we investigate in this study are not the literal, physical places as they exist in the real world, but rather they are framed as being betwixt and multi-layered. The storytelling is playful and questioning, inviting the viewer to contemplate the possibilities of a home which is at the same time both disconnected, and familiar. It is this playfulness in regard to space, time and meaning that makes the places that reality paranormal programmes present, uncanny. This is also integral to their enduring success in keeping the viewer suspended between hope and rationality, and the ever-present potential that they 'might' glimpse behind the veil between this world and the next.

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