Destabilising the home: place making, dark tourism and the spectral.

IRONSIDE, R. and SMITH, F.

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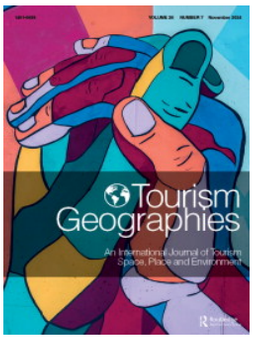

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Rachael Ironside & Fiona Smith

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Destabilising the home: place making, dark tourism and the spectral

Rachael Ironside and Fiona Smith

School of Creative and Cultural Business, Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen, UK

ABSTRACT

Ghosts, hauntings and the spectral are intrinsically linked to sites of dark tourism. Supernatural stories commonly emerge in places connected with tragedy, death and the macabre, forming spectral geographies in which the past and present intertwine. Visiting places of supernatural significance has long been of interest to tourists (Holmes and Inglis, 2004), however, in the last two decades a considerable 'ghost-hunting' subculture has emerged alongside commercial events and tourist attractions dedicated to engaging visitors with spectral possibilities (Eaton, 2020; Ironside, 2018). As a result, places associated with ghost folklore including private homes, hotels, and heritage buildings, have become popular travel destinations due to their supernatural associations. Film and television media are often credited with the popularisation of haunted places (Edwards, 2019; Hill, 2010); however, more recently web-based and social media platforms have become spaces for promoting, reporting, and sharing paranormal experiences. In this paper, we explore the construction of spectral geographies, specifically haunted houses, through online narratives. By drawing upon textual analysis of both marketing and online reviews we analyse two cases, *30 East Drive* and *The Ancient Ram Inn*, and explore how these private homes have been transformed into sites of dark tourism through digital storytelling and discourse. Through our analysis we consider how personal experience, intertextuality, and uncanny signifiers contribute to a form of placemaking through digital media and storytelling (Halegoua & Polson, 2021), experiential consumerism (Pine & Gilmore, 2011) and an evolving spiritual quest culture (Eaton, 2015).

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Introduction

The link between ghosts and dark tourism is unsurprising. As places of 'death, suffering and the seemingly macabre' (Stone, 2006, p. 153), dark tourism sites are

CONTACT Fiona Smith f.c.b.smith@rgu.ac.uk School of Creative and Cultural Business, Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen, UK

intrinsically linked to ghosts, whether through spectral reverberations of the past (Sterling, 2014) or in the literal haunting of spaces by the deceased.[1] The connection between dark tourism and ghost tourism has been noted by several scholars (Drinkwater et al., 2022; Houran et al., 2020; Ironside, 2018; Stone, 2009), and is often perceived as a 'lighter' form of dark tourism (Stone, 2006) facilitated by the commodification of ghostly narratives and entertainment-focused attractions (Garcia, 2012; Wyatt et al., 2021). However, more recently the complexity of ghost tourism – also referred to under the wider umbrella of 'paranormal tourism' (Houran et al., 2020; Pharino et al., 2018), has received increased attention acknowledging its multifaceted nature.

Ghosts are intrinsically linked to place but despite being often classified as 'lighter' tourism, locations associated with hauntings, spectres and the otherworldly, have the potential to become popular dark tourism attractions (Lennon & Foley, 2000) and often arise around places of dark heritage such as ancient cities, cemeteries, hospitals, prisons, and asylums (Garcia, 2012; Thompson, 2010). However, on occasions the spectral geographies that popularise ghost tourism manifest in places that would seem disconnected from traditionally 'dark' sites (as defined by Stone, 2006).

In this paper, we examine critically the discourses of both ghost tourism producers and consumers in regard to placemaking (as defined by Lew, 2017) and re-placeing (or the subjective reproducing of the self in relation to place through digital media—Halegoua, 2020). We do this through the exploration of two locations with seemingly 'ordinary' histories, places that have once operated as dwellings and homes, and examine how they have been transformed into sites of dark tourism through digital storytelling. *The Ancient Ram Inn* dates from the twelfth century and is a grade II listed building located in Gloucestershire. It is reported by the media to be one of the most haunted locations in the UK and has been subjected to many paranormal investigations. *30 East Drive, Pontefract, Yorkshire* is an unassuming, ex-council house that has been the site of much paranormal speculation, reported in the news, the focus of a film, and reputed to be the location of the UK's most violent poltergeist. Both locations have hosted numerous ghost-hunting events attracting visitors to experience, first-hand, the paranormal activity that has contributed to their infamous reputation amongst the most haunted attractions in the UK.

The spectral narratives of each location have also proliferated through media, marketing, and online discourses, as visitors share, and both individually and collectively construct interpretations of place through their own experiences (Clarke, 2012; Hill, 2017). By analysing marketing and tourist texts from a range of online platforms, we aim to demonstrate how these personal accounts that make use of intertextuality and uncanny signification, contribute to the continuous reconstruction and re-placeing (Halegoua, 2015) of the spectral narratives in these 'ordinary' domestic spaces.

Literature review

Spectral geographies, ghost tourism and dark tourism

The late 20th and early 21st centuries have seen an increase in cross-disciplinary interest in the intersection of place and affective experience in urban contexts. For example,

Steven Pile (2005) seeks to draw on the concepts and language of critical thinkers and sociologists in his attempt to make sense of the layers of history that are compressed in urban spaces. His work fits into what is now regarded by many (Maddern & Adey, 2008) as 'spectral geography' and attempts to track the ghostly figure through what he calls the 'phantasmagoria of city life', this concept itself, a ghostly echo of Baudelaire's earlier perspective of the Modern 'flaneur'.[2]

The origins of psychogeography which has resonance with spectral geography, reside, in part, with Guy Debord in 1950s Paris, who conceptualised the interdependency of the geographical environment and human behaviour/affect, initially for an aesthetic purpose but later for a political one (Coverley, 2018). For Merlin Coverley (2020), the concept of psychogeography is intrinsically interlinked with that of 'hauntology' which allows the examination of the spatial dimension to be placed in counterpoint to the temporal aspects; effectively, a critical exposition of the layering of temporal folds in relation to place. 'Haunting', Coverley states, 'is as much a function of place as it is of time' (2020, p. 249).

This co-located concept of 'hauntology' is problematic in its definition as it is used differently across various fields, and it is attributed in part to Jacques Derrida (1994). Derrida (1994) alludes to Marx' reference to Communism as a force that continues to haunt Europe; at once present and then absent, recurring and re-surfacing during times of residual reflection and bringing with it renewed interest. For Derrida, ghosts re-locate from the past to the present. Most broadly, however, the term has captured academic imagination across several fields and opened up a framework through which to examine recurring aspects from the socio-cultural past or in the case of Mark Fisher's (2014) work, also the erased futures of modernity that appear in the present.

The rich interdisciplinary field of spectral geography provides a useful framework within which to examine ghost tourism. Garcia (2012) defines ghost tourism as, 'the desire to encounter ghosts, interest in the supernatural, and visitation of places associated with the spirit world such as cemeteries, haunted houses, castles, and historic towns' (p. 14) and may include travelling for 'leisure, investigation, services, products, or conventions' (Haynes, 2016, p. 3). Places associated with ghost tourism often include historic buildings, hotels, restaurants, museums, and tours (Ironside, 2018; Houran et al., 2020) and tend to focus on spaces with a dark heritage (Ironside, 2023). Indeed, ghosts form part of wider spectral geographies manifesting from the troubled memories, materials, and landscapes of a place (McCormack, 2010). As both Hanks (2016) and Bell (2019) consider, ghosts and the supernatural may even reveal layers of social and political trauma embedded in the environment.

These 'haunted' locations possess a 'terroir' (Smith, 2015) generating a sense of place, which as Houran et al. (2020, p. 3) state may be connected to the 'mood and trappings, landmarks, historical drama, or cultural flavour highlighted in the presentations' of spectral landscapes. Ghost tours, for instance, tend to occur in places that appear spooky or bewitched, such as ancient cities, cemeteries, hospitals, prisons, and asylums (Garcia, 2012; Thompson, 2010). They often take place in dark, quiet surroundings, and in physical environments that imbue strange or otherworldly qualities (Rahmawati, 2016; Thompson, 2010). As Drinkwater et al. (2022) speculate, certain spaces, such as those characterised as haunted, appear to embody a certain allure or captivation, an enchantment which is appealing to visitors. Enchanted

places are associated with their ability to invoke 'great surprise, delight, wonder, or awe', and yet simultaneously may create a sense of dissonance or negative emotion (Drinkwater et al., 2022, p. 195). In their study testing the *situational-enchantment* of haunted places, Houran et al. (2022) note that enchantment is achieved not by offering consumers what they want but rather situating them 'betwixt and between reality and fantasy' (p. 223). The sensuous and affective components of haunted spaces are integral in achieving this (Holloway, 2006; Matless, 2008). The séance of the Spiritualist era offers a clear example here. Séance spaces can be understood in relation to their material and immaterial geographies. A darkened room, round table, bodies positioned holding hands, particular objects that may be moved or become conduits of spiritual activity. The manifestations of spirits or ectoplasm, atmospheric changes, the feelings of touch, or experiencing disembodied sounds and voices. However, as Holloway and Kneale (2008) observe, despite these manifestations, which may otherwise indicate spiritual presence, the cause of such phenomena is plagued by an absence or uncertainty of the cause. As they go on to state, 'spectral geographies are shadowy and excessive affairs, never fixable, always caught between explanatory criteria' (p308). It is, perhaps, in these betwixt, uncertain spectral geographies, where the *possibility* of experiencing ghosts is engendered and that ghost tourism seems to thrive. However, spectral geographies are not necessarily solely defined by absence but rather also the presence of concurrent, fragmented narratives passed across time. It is not simply the geographic space then that is significant but also the depth of historical and temporal layering that foregrounds the haunted experience.

Ghost tourism, mediatization and place-making

Visiting places associated with ghosts is undoubtedly driven by a rise in popular media (Hill, 2011; Hill et al., 2018; Hill et al., 2019; Holloway, 2010). As Clarke (2012) and Davies (2007) note, paranormal popular culture, including film, television, magazines, books and more recently, social media, have increased the interest in ghosts and popularised haunted locations; in some instances, creating a 'brand identity' (Davies, 2007, p. 64). In their literary analysis, Hill et al. (2018) suggest that the success of ghostly narratives, and by proxy, ghost tourism, relies on several key elements termed The VAPUS Model. They suggest that it is the Versatility, Adaptability, Participatory, Universality and Scalability of ghost narratives that contribute to their enduring prevalence and potency in contemporary society. The rise of ghost-hunting reality television shows has been particularly significant in promoting the paranormal potential of locations. Television shows such as Most Haunted (2002–present), Ghost Hunters (2004-present) and Ghost Adventures (2008– present), follow investigators as they visit reputedly haunted locations to document paranormal events. Investigations are framed as 'real', despite notable concerns about the authenticity of the claims presented (Hill et al., 2019), and by association the sites featured in the paranormal texts become sites of supernatural interest for viewers (Edwards, 2019). In these paranormal media texts, the framing of place often draws upon visual and narrative signifiers which are unsettling and connote uncanny potential (Smith & Ironside, 2022). Childhood items (such as dolls) are, for instance, used frequently in paranormal film

and television, and as Leeder (2013) notes disrupt a sense of the familiar by attributing frightening qualities. Likewise, film and TV cameras capture liminal spaces (stairways, windows, doorways), places where ghostly experiences are most often reported (Lipman, 2014; Waskul & Waskul, 2016), while presenting the opportunity for viewers to engage in the possibility of seeing a ghost (Williams, 2010). Viewers of paranormal texts are, therefore, both observers and active participants. They are invited to contribute to the construction of place, and its uncanny, and more specifically eerie, qualities, through their participation in and affective reaction to paranormal media. As Smith and Ironside observe in their study of paranormal-reality television in the home 'the "Unheimliches Haus" or *uncanny house* is both a feature of and trope used in reality paranormal television' (p. 103). Koven (2007) suggests that this blend of folklore and reality television constitutes a form of mass-mediated ostension where viewers are invited to take part in a 'televised legend-trip'. The desire to participate in real-life legend-tripping also initiated a rise in amateur paranormal investigation groups and commercial experiences that enable people to visit haunted locations and participate in ghost-hunting activities. Hanks (2016) has termed this the '*Most Haunted* Effect', in recognition of the increased visitor interest and ghost hunting activities that follow televised accounts of haunted locations. As Smith and Ironside (2022) determine, 'while paranormal action is the key commercial driver, it is the *place* that is central to each episode' (pp. 96–97), and as such the paranormal *potential* of place, is mediated, constructed, and reconstituted through ghostly media narratives. As such, paranormal media constitutes a form of placemaking.

Lew (2017) defines placemaking as, 'how a culture group imprints its values, perceptions, memories, and traditions on a landscape and gives meaning to geographic space' (p. 449). As Lew considers, placemaking may be both top-down and bottom-up in approach, derived from strategic development and marketing activities, as well as incremental community-led initiatives. Regardless, it contributes to 'how people recognize, define, and create the places they often call home, whether intentionally or not…[and is]…fundamental to the tourist attractiveness of place' (p. 450). Beyond traditional forms of placemaking, scholars have considered the value of digital media for placemaking and the construction of place-based narratives. These may arise from wider forms of cultural representation (such as those mediated through paranormal television) (Cresswell, 2015) or emerge through visitor and community engagement with online digital media platforms and by using technology to explore physical places (Norum & Polson, 2021; Wilken & Humphreys, 2021). The latter is widely considered to constitute digital placemaking defined by Halegoua and Polson (2021, p. 574) as, 'the use of digital media to create a sense of place for oneself and/or others—to embrace digital media affordances in order to cultivate or maintain a sense of attachment to place'. However, as others have noted (Ironside & Reid, 2024; Norum & Polson, 2021) while digital technology may help to foster engagement with places in which people are physically present, digital media may also engage people remotely in digital placemaking practices.

In the context of ghost tourism, the components of the VAPUS model (Hill et al., 2018; Hill et al., 2019) are particularly notable in the sharing of ghost stories and personal experiences through social media. Online platforms provide opportunities for people to share and discuss opinions about the paranormal (Hill, 2017), while also

offering a space to formulate sceptical and sympathetic views on supernatural phenomena (Clarke, 2012). Sites such as YouTube and Facebook have become particularly prevalent in the ghost-hunting community, that may use these platforms to share evidence and establish their authority and brand as paranormal investigators (Hill, 2017; Ironside, 2016). Ghost tours and ghost-hunting experiences actively encourage the sharing of photos and 'evidence' on social media (Lauro and Paul, 2013), further promoting the haunted reputation of locations and a sense of place as harbouring paranormal potential. Ghostly narratives have, therefore, *adapted* to the changing landscape of media platforms encouraging *participation* in their construction and distribution, and in doing so contributing towards their *scalability*. As such, new and evolving spectral narratives about place emerge through engagement with digital media, constituting a form of 're-placing' (Halegoua, 2020, p. 17). This bottom-up approach to placemaking using digital media is recognised by Frith and Richter (2021) as rich in possibility for the construction of counter-narratives that 'push against dominant histories and dominant stories we tell about place' (pp. 697–698). For reputedly haunted locations, the prevalence of ghostly narratives through media, and in particular social media, may therefore construct spectral geographies for places, whether invited or not.

Methodology

Two case studies were selected that were felt to be interesting because of their original purpose as spaces with strong domestic emphasis but through their specific histories had developed into places of reputedly strong paranormal activity. Between 1 May—31 October 2022, over one hundred ghost hunting experiences were on offer by various companies at the two locations, over 50% of these were sold out at the start of May and this provided further justification for their selection for the study.

Two key research questions emerged: why and how did these places change across time? Further, what factors have contributed to the continued reconstruction of the ghost narratives that have been told about them?

The approach to the texts was based on a hermeneutic interpretive approach where the examination of textual fragments that come from promoters and consumers of the paranormal experience informed our understanding of the wider research questions. We identified two separate corpora.

The first corpus included 23 excerpts from the marketing narratives on various tourism websites such as *Haunted Happenings*, *Haunted Rooms*, *Fright Nights*, used to attract paranormal consumers and the second corpus included approximately 80 individual comments from visitors who had left messages on sites such as TripAdvisor or the individual website for the ghost tourism site. *The Ancient Ram Inn* and *30 East Drive* were selected as example cases of ghost tourism locations for the following reasons: they have been marketed extensively particularly through both traditional and social media and because they are both examples of domestic contexts which have emerged as radically altered and that reflect darker and more sinister spaces. These 'ordinary' domestic spaces have been refracted through the mediatized lenses of horror and the uncanny and therefore, they were deemed appropriate cases to examine critically as constructed spectral geographies. The tourists' comments allowed for the social discourse

Online Corpus	Code attributed *30 East Drive*	Code attributed *Ancient Ram Inn*
30 East Drive Website Visitor Review	ED1	
Barri Ghai Website	BG-ED	BG-ARI
Dusk Till Dawn Events Website	DD-ED	
Fright Nights Website		FN-ARI
Ghost Hunt UK Website	GH-ED	
Haunted Happenings Website	HH-ED	
Haunted Houses Website	HH-ED	
Haunted Rooms Website	HR-ED	
ParaSpirit Events Website	PS-ED	
TripAdvisor Visitor Reviews	TA-ED1	TA-ARI1
TripAdvisor Website – Marketing Description	TA-ED	TA-ARI
Veritas Paranormal Website	VP-ED	

Figure 1. Online corpus and coding information.

to be appraised, specifically in relation to the connection to place. See Figure 1 for information related to the online platforms examined and codes attributed for analysis.

The web scraping of data, coding and analysis were carried out manually and the researchers did not use analytical software during the process. This allowed the researchers to immerse themselves in the data and provide more detailed and nuanced analysis.

As Critical Discourse Analysis does not offer a prescriptive method as such (Wodak and Ludwig (1999): our analysis followed broadly the work of Norman Fairclough, examining the semiotic-discursive (description) dimension which acknowledges that language contributes to the construction of social practice (Fairclough, 1995). This form of analysis allowed for a deeper examination of the discourse fragments at both *description (text)* and *interpretation (discursive practice)* levels. In turn, this allowed us to offer explanations of prevailing ideologies in the texts that relate to other social and cultural discourses and epistemologies and thereby facilitated a critical examination of the construction of placemaking through digital media in the two cases examined.

Analysis and discussion

Several themes emerged from the interpretive analysis of both sets of texts, including the intertextual and uncanny effects in relation to the *mediatization* (the profiling and construction of the sites in and by the media) of the locations, and the *personal ghost consumer experience*. The following analysis is divided into these themes that emanated from both the ghost tourism producer discourse and the ghost tourism consumer discourse.

Mediatization, intertextuality and the uncanny in the digital haunted house

As noted by several scholars (Clarke, 2012; Hill, 2017; Hill et al., 2019) online and social media sites have provided an opportunity for the sharing and proliferation of paranormal narratives. Further, Halegoua (2015) suggests that digital media allow for

people to reconstruct place through 're-placeing': 'the constant reproduction and re-making of place over time as well as the act of reproducing place as re-mediated through digital media' (p. 17). There is evidence in both case studies that the ghost producers and ghost consumers actively re-place through digital media and examples are considered from both sides.

The Ancient Ram Inn and *30 East Drive* are introduced to the public, at the *description* level, as haunted locations by using both commercial and journalistic tones in the online marketing discourse created by the ghost tourism producers. In one example, the construction of *The Ancient Ram Inn* plays into the dark contemporary imagination as aural and physical signifiers of the supernatural are intertwined into a vignette of haunting that is potentially available to all. This aspect of the discourse encourages the conflation of the historical detail with the key signifiers that are embedded in fictional narratives such as horror literature and film. This is illustrative of the very nature of spectrality where fragments of the past are imprisoned in the present within these locations.

> *The Ancient Ram is built where three Ley Lines converge and on top of a 3,000 year old ancient Pagan burial ground. If that isn't enough to pique your interest, mysterious* ***wailing*** *has been heard,* ***children's bones*** *have been found, the* ***walls can tremble****, furniture has been seen to levitate, and visitors have been known to* ***run screaming*** *from the building in fear.* (FN-ARI) (our emphasis)

A different example from *30 East Drive*, employing a textual register that resembles a news narrative seems to offer more gravitas. The ages of the children are even included and terms such as 'witnessed' connote a more objective and rational position.

> *Jean, Joe, Phillip (15) and Diane (12) Pritchard moved into Number 30 East Drive, Pontefract in August 1966. Almost immediately, during the hot summer Bank Holiday, Phillip and his Grandmother* ***first witnessed*** *a baffling phenomenon – a fine layer of chalk like dust falling not from the ceiling, but from a level below head height.* (VP-ED)

Both *The Ancient Ram Inn* and *30 East Drive* are constructed in the marketing discourse in broadly similar ways. Linguistic superlatives are frequently used such as, *'most incredible poltergeist haunting'* (TA-ED), '*England's most notorious and frightening haunted houses*' (BG-ED) and '*reputation for being haunted*' (TA-ARI). Both cases foreground the construction of spectral geography in different ways. The first relates the paranormal to ancient and inaccessible anachronistic pagan rituals and the second by emphasising the presence of extra-ordinary elements within an ordinary location and time.

This linguistic construction is part of a very strong strategy related to the reputation-building of the sites and is used to attract potential visitors (Hill, 2011; Hill et al., 2019). The naturalised assumption that corresponds to Fairclough's *interpretation* level, that the sites need no introduction because their reputations are self-evidently important is inscribed in this discourse and further underlines that readers are primed and expected to accept this encoding as natural. This text includes the explicit referencing of the global reach of the site and is combined with *intertextual* references to media events involving both locations as evidenced below.

> *Its reputation for being haunted superseded its historic reputation when Evette Fielding and the Most Haunted Team filmed there in 2004.* (TA-ARI)

> *The movie 'When the Lights Went Out' brought this house (unknown beyond the borders of Yorkshire) to the world.* (TA-ED)

The mediatization of the locations not only raises their profiles but also constructs a further layer of connotation in that the media determines the reality of the paranormal potential. The media coverage of these places, which to a lesser or greater degree promotes and perpetuates the legitimacy of paranormal activity in society, generates a stronger potential for ghostly activity and this is both a seductive and effective aspect of the marketing strategy as it will draw an affective response from ghost consumers (Edwards, 2019; Hill et al., 2018).

Within media representations of spectral places, signifiers of the uncanny, or as Freud ([1919] 2003) defined it, *unheimlich* (unhomely), are frequently present and these were also apparent in the online discourse used to frame each case study location. In these texts, the *uncanny* is inscribed in the personification of the buildings connoting that there is an otherworldliness about these sites which take on a 'life of their own'. The transformative aspect, where a former guest house and home (The Ancient Ram Inn) becomes a paranormal location, results in it becoming an object of intensified interest and consumption. Intertextually, this relates to the many horror narratives in which the 'ordinary' residence becomes 'extra-ordinary' due to its location and indexical connection to previous dark places of ritual (for instance, *The Amityville House*). This is further supported in the description of *30 East Drive* which connotes the autonomous agency of the house itself. This house '*attracts paranormal investigators from all over the world*' (HR-ED) implying that a supernatural force is drawing people to it. At the *interpretation* level, this presupposes a naturalised understanding on the part of the audience.

The ghost consumer discourse further attributes a sense of life and energy into each location, albeit one with frightening qualities and thereby contributing *actively* to the construction of spectral geography and placemaking through the further layering of lived experience. *30 East Drive* is described as a place where '*the very fabric of the building is alive with something sinister*' (ED7) and '*extremely active*' (ED2). Visitors are warned to '*NEVER lower your guard and underestimate this house*' (ED9). Likewise, *The Ancient Ram Inn* is described as an '*eerie place*' (TA-ARI4), '*sufficiently creepy to send a chill down your spine on a warm summer day*' (TA-ARI13) and engendering a '*sense that some of the unseen residents have not yet left*' (TA–ARI16). By personifying and energizing the home, saturating the material and immaterial space with unsettling qualities, places are constructed as uncanny being, 'physically, ontologically and epistemically out of place' (Smith & Ironside, 2022; p. 93). The sense of home, as a place of security and safety, is destabilised through these spectral narratives.

The uncanny, through the aspects of presence and absence is also written into the producer and consumer discourse surrounding the spectres which inhabit these spaces. Ghosts in both locations are attributed unsettling and frightening qualities, referred to as '*demons and evil spirits*' (TA-ARI11), '*paedophiles and killers*' (TA-ARI10) and '*dark shadows*' (ED16). In the configuration of the poltergeist at *30 East Drive*, the phantasm is provided with agency in the discourse by both the tourism

producers and the consumers. Several descriptions refer to the poltergeist as 'Fred' which serves to personalise and personify the paranormal activity. It also makes the 'extra-ordinary', 'ordinary', drawing the manifestation into the material world and thereby, allowing a connection to be made more easily. At the same time, some of the texts lack specific detail about how and where it came from and this arguably creates a different space which allows people to project their own narratives on to it, thereby allowing the phantasm to be under perpetual re-construction. It is worth noting, too, the veracity with which some sites refer to the existence of the ghost. In some of the ghost producer discourse, there is no question that the manifestation is real, present and active because the language is assertive and declarative:

> *Some of the house rules **pertain directly to Fred himself**. **He prefers** the kettle to remain unplugged but filled when not in use, and visitors are asked to respect that to avoid incurring one of **Fred's trademark destructive tantrums**!* (HR-ED)

These uncanny signifiers in the online discourse, attribute qualities to both locations that disturb their original purpose as a home and place of living and re-place or contribute to the reconstruction of place. The memories of these places as they existed originally have become distorted and corrupted by both the market and the visitors' projected desires to actively experience horror and trauma. They are constructed as uninhabitable, unliveable, and it is through these shadowy, frightening temporal and spatial layers that these locations emerge and establish their prominence and popularity as dark ghost tourism attractions.

Ghost consumer experience and digital placemaking

The overwhelming need to express personal engagement with the haunted space came through the ghost producer discourse strongly. As noted by several scholars (Dancausa, Hernández and Pérezc, 2020; Ironside, 2018) the search for and affirmation of experience is an important pull-motivator for people visiting haunted locations. Bryman (1999) notes the use of theming as a characteristic of capitalist production in his work *The Disneyization of Society*. Theming, he suggests, is used to facilitate the ease with which a consumer experience ensures profitability. It may be argued here that the commodification of the supernatural place through ghost tourism and associated events is a form of such theming in which consumers are invited to participate. The opportunity to spend the night or spend time in these locations is foregrounded significantly in the producer texts as visitors are instructed to join the celebrity ghost hunters and paranormal specialists to have the 'genuine' spectral experience e.g. 'Join Barri Ghai from TV's Help! My House is Haunted' (BG-ARI). At the same time, this connotes a sense of playfulness as consumers are asked to come and experience the haunted space personally. At the description level, this is signified using linguistic practices that encourage visitors, not simply, to discover the haunted qualities for themselves passively, but rather, actively participate as ghost hunters.

> *…now, it is your turn to step into 30 East Drive with Haunted Houses Events! (HH-ED)*

> *There will be no history tours at the start of the night which will enable you to get straight into vigils and investigations at this very haunted location where YOU are the Ghost Hunter! (FN-ARI)*

The accounts presented by the visitors to both *The Ancient Ram Inn* and *30 East Drive* are varied and include both rational and emotional tones. Comments include emphatic descriptions of spiritual affirmation and conversions of sceptics to believers, akin to the use of online platforms observed by Clarke (2012) and Edwards (2008), but also disappointment when no paranormal activity was experienced. The key thing that is present in all these fragments of discourse is the fact that there is an expectation of and in some cases sense of *entitlement* to the experience. If a genuine and immersive experience is promised by the ghost tourism producers, then visitors expect this to be fulfilled. The predictability of paranormal production leads to these expectations even when ghostly activity cannot be guaranteed (Ironside, 2018).

The strongest expectation clearly relates to the desire to experience authentic paranormal activity. With the apparent decline in organised religion[3] and the rise of what Eaton (2015) calls a 'spiritual quest culture', the engagement in paranormal activities and the pursuit of proof to affirm a spirit world is significant. However, the number of comments from ghost tourism consumers that seem to genuinely convey a desire to explore spiritual culture is low compared with the number of people that seem to be pursuing an immersive consumer experience, although further ethnographic research is needed to explore this in more detail. Some of the discourse fragments record personal experiences that affirm supernatural occurrences but equally a significant proportion of the discourse relates to disappointment in the experience suggesting that it is fake or not frightening enough. There would seem to be a strong desire to experience the trauma of the haunting first hand. Freud's (1917) work on the pathological state of the melancholic seems to present itself as relevant here also, given the drive in some people to pursue repeatedly the 'genuine' (and often traumatic) paranormal experience. In these cases, the spectral landscapes are re-constituted as places which do not simply record past events but rather become sites where paranormal experiences are expected to be guaranteed, authentic and satisfying.

Comments that refer to affirmative experiences are often expressed using a perfunctory tone. These include gathering evidence such as '*captured a class A EVP'* or feeling the presence of some manifestation or other. Activity was often recorded as 'good' when visitors assessed quantitatively that they had experienced enough paranormal phenomena to make the visit worthwhile. To be a 'good experience' there needed to have been a significant level of tangible experience. Comments at both locations such as '*we had a really good night*' and '*it was a truly amazing night*' *(TA-ED5);* '*utterly terrifying*' *(ED16)* and '*what we experienced was absolutely impossible*' *(ED13)* were common. Other fragments were confirmatory in tone and even seemed to offer incontrovertible evidence, such as the comment below:

> *After witnessing noises, experiencing physical pain and sensing more than four spirits throughout our long and haunting night, we can safely say this* ***old building is one of the most haunted locations to date.*** (ED17) (Our emphasis)

There were also several 'road-to-Damascus' experiences recorded where previous sceptics were now convinced in the '*life-changing*' (ED18) power of the spirit world.

> *My husband Steve who WAS a hardened sceptic, has now been well and truly converted to a true believer of the paranormal!* (ED18)

Some visitors seemed satisfied with little activity and others required much more evidence, not only, to prove that ghosts exist, but also, to feel immersed in a frightening, figural experience. One comment related to 30 East Drive where the visitor mentioned that they had talked with the infamous Black Monk '*…that killed little girls*…[and]…*that was interesting*' (TA-ED10). The casual intonation seemed to be one of indifference rather than emotional engagement. Another fragment recounted a situation where the participant felt as though nothing had happened, but had received a physical mark on their neck:

> *Nothing truly happened, although I did end up with strange red handprints on my neck. I felt a choking sensation in the attic, and when I got back in the car, my mother noticed handmarks around my throat! That was pretty freaky, but aside from that,* ***nothing weird happened***. (TA-ARI13) (our emphasis)

Visitors that are critical of the experience refer to their acute disappointment and dissatisfaction about the experience at *30 East Drive* and the owner retaliates assertively by, among other things, referring potential visitors to the Terms and Conditions of the event. One visitor described it as '*fake and to be honest really unprofessional*' (TA-ED6). Another provided a detailed description in terms of how the visitors attempted to incur the wrath of the ghost but to no avail. The tone of these reviews is combative, and accusations of fakery are interlinked with not getting value for money. There is, however, a suggestion that it is not just the perceived financial loss that is inscribed in the disappointment but rather the loss of time in pursuing spiritual affirmation. In the experiential economy of ghost tourism there is little room for error on the part of the producers as the resultant negative reviews can damage potential future earnings.

> *Stayed here 22nd August 2021…with a group of friends…very disappointed…what a* ***waste of time and money*** *(TA-ED6)*

> *This house is not haunted. I slept a full night in the small bedroom and not a thing happened. We did a seance, we goaded the dolls, we left the key in the back of the door despite instructions not to. We unplugged the kettle and risked Fred's wrath. Bugger all occurred. (TA-ED8)*

As Bryman (1999) suggests, the entertainment economy produces content regularly and predictably. This, he says, is based on the functions in Ritzer's McDonaldization: efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control, and fosters certain expectations in consumers. The owner of 30 East Drive uses an argument that underlines that the spirit world is chaotic and transitory and, therefore, far from predictable. Ironically, he refers to the fact, several times, that '*spirits are not performing monkeys*' *(TA-ED9 Owner response)*. A tension exists, paradoxically, where he insists that the spirits are not being exploited and may not perform on the one hand and that the site is run as a business, protected legally by the Terms and Conditions of the event.

> *- it is both frustrating and disappointing that some of the folk that visit 30 East Drive are naive enough to believe they are visiting a Disney exhibit…It is precisely because* ***nothing in this house is faked*** *that on the occasion of your visit - nothing happened. It is sad that you didn't*

experience anything when you visited - but that I'm afraid is the ***luck of the draw as clearly specified in our T's & C's*** *(TA-ED6 Owner response)*

Personal experience plays a central role in the online marketing discourse and visitor reviews for both *The Ancient Ram Inn* and *30 East Drive*. The possibility of encountering paranormal phenomena is deliberately utilised by the ghost tourism producers of both sites but also engendered through the visitors' own descriptions of their experience. In both cases, the quantity, affective and dark qualities of the experience (often described as evil, frightening, sinister and creepy), construct for some a particular sense of place (Halegoua & Polson, 2021) and ascribe a set of expectations (Holloway, 2006). Interestingly, reviews that express disappointment and infer an 'experience-expectation' gap, are reformulated in the online discourse by both marketers and other visitors to suggest that the absence of experience is an indication of authenticity. As such, the playful possibility of these spectral geographies, where ghosts may or may not 'appear', feeds into the construction of the haunted house as an enchanting [and liminal] space 'betwixt and between reality and fantasy' (Houran et al., 2022, p. 229). In these places, authenticity is negotiable, and subjective, constructed through the personal experience of visitors. A device utilised by marketers to negotiate the inherent tensions that arise in promoting a dark tourism experience that cannot, knowingly, be guaranteed. The spectral geography emerging from dark tourism would seem to have been colonised by the market which causes tensions for visitors as some seek to learn more of the past and how this temporal sedimentation creates affective resonances such as eeriness and others seek a visceral and tangible jouissance.

Conclusion

Ghost tourism producers and consumers both participate in placemaking using digital media, contributing to the re-construction of *The Ancient Ram Inn* and *30 East Drive* as places of paranormal potential through their online discourse. Intertextual references to horror and literature, as well as ghost-hunting reality television, proliferate ghostly narratives within these locations. Personal experiences lend credibility and validity to these claims (whether the ghost is experienced or not). Using Hill et al. (2019) VAPUS model, it is the *universality* of the paranormal claims embedded through intertextuality and personal experience that help to construct an uncanny sense of the locations as dark spectral geographies that do not rely on genuine historical framing. This is further developed in the language and signifiers used to describe both places which draw upon the unsettling attributes of the house and its ghostly inhabitants. In doing so, these spaces become *unheimlich*, characterised (even personified) by their dark qualities, assigned through online narratives which recount people's affective and experiential encounters with these spaces. The *participatory* aspects of the discourse facilitated by the tourist experience and the ability to share this through online platforms also contributes to the *scalability* of locations which have become, through mediatization and commercialization, branded as two of the 'most haunted' locations in the UK (Davies, 2007). The spectral geographies of both locations are then mediated, constructed, and reconstituted over time as 'dark places' through media and online discourse (Smith & Ironside, 2022).

It is, however, through this construction that both locations have become popular ghost tourism attractions. As Drinkwater et al. (2022) speculate, haunted spaces

imbue a certain enchantment. Yet, this enchantment is not always emotionally positive, as noted in these texts, rather it may evoke a sense of dissonance, liminality, and discomfort and this is actively pursued by some. To return to Holloway and Kneale (2008) spectral geographies may be shadowy and uncertain, and it is in these spaces that the *possibility*, rather than certainty, of experiencing ghosts becomes the attraction. This presents challenges in our contemporary society where the consumer expectation is on the delivery and authenticity of experiences (Pine & Gilmore, 2011). Disappointment in not receiving this, in not experiencing *the ghost*, is evidenced in the visitor discourse from both locations. Yet, there is also a playfulness established in the discourse that suggests that authenticity is not gained by experiencing the ghost, indeed authenticity may be established by *not experiencing the ghost*, and instead immersing oneself in the sensory and affective feeling of place. As Houran et al. (2022) suggest the commercialisation of spectral geographies, such as haunted houses, may suggest a movement from consuming experiences to immersion in an 'enchantment economy'.

This playfulness is also observed in the construction of discourse related to the darker histories and events from each location. Previous reports of activity that, in some cases, is significantly violent, is one of the key aspects that seems to attract visitors as though the experience is a controlled simulation rather than a historic site at which dark practices (including devil worship) have been reported. Paradoxically, while participation in ghost tourism at these locations implies 'spiritual questing' (Eaton, 2015) and visitors do claim transformational experiences, at the same time these are often interpreted through an entertainment, consumer-driven lens.

This paper has examined the reconstruction or 're-placing' (Halegoua, 2020) of the spectral and sought to contribute to the growing body of work on placemaking and digital media. In the context examined here, the contribution of online narratives by ghost tourism consumers and producers attribute meaning and identity to place thereby constructing new spectral discourses. To return to Lew (2017) these places become recognised, defined and created through a spectral lens. Digital media affords a co-creative, incremental transformation of place as contributions to online platforms influence how people experience and sense place—physically and at a distance. As such, we argue that these practices represent forms of digital placemaking that stretch beyond the current definition (Halegoua & Polson, 2021) to recognise that places may also be made (and re-made) through remote digital participation (Ironside & Reid, 2024). For spectral geographies, like the haunted locations examined here, the grounding of narratives in the affective and experiential properties of place affords them an interpretative quality and, arguably, makes them ideally positioned for (and even vulnerable to) continuous re-placing through digital media practices.

Notes

1. For the purposes of this paper, we do not make any claims as to the existence of 'real' hauntings. Rather, these are discussed in the context of the personal experiences and marketing discourse produced online by ghost tourism producers and consumers.
2. Baudelaire's own perception of the flaneur was that of a man of leisure, an urban explorer and observer of life and one who had both the time and financial means to stroll around the urban environment at his own pace.

3. In 2013, UK Church membership had declined to 5.4 million (10.3%) from 10.6 million in 1930. Data provided by Church Statistics indicates that if current trends continue, membership will fall to 8.4% of the population by 2025 (Reported in Faith Survey, 2022).

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Notes on contributors

Dr Rachael Ironside is an Associate Professor at Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen. Her research explores the relationship between the supernatural, heritage and culture, and how this impacts our experience and understanding of the world. Rachael has published widely on the role of social interaction and extraordinary experience, and the intersection between folklore, dark tourism, and place. She is co-author of *Making Sense of the Paranormal and Folklore, People and Place: International perspective on tourism and tradition in storied places*.

Dr Fiona Smith is a Principal Lecturer at Robert Gordon University. Her research interests examining the ways in which the media constructs the past and media consumers' engagement with these constructions. Her most recent work examines the presence of the uncanny in the photography of abandoned places.

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