For a Ghoul Time, Call: Telephonic Terror at the Boundary of Narrative and Information in BBC Ghostwatch

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Cover Page Footnote

Introduction

On Halloween night 1992, BBC1 aired *Ghostwatch*, a seasonal feature-length television special about a family plagued by a poltergeist. Fictional, scripted, and filmed in its entirety prior to broadcast, *Ghostwatch* follows the formal conventions of live, factual television. With her two daughters increasingly distressed and having exhausted the resources available from local government, single mother Pam Early is at the end of her tether, and as a last resort she allows a BBC television crew into her North West London home in the hopes of vindicating their claims and ending the haunting. Featuring a slew of well-known British television personalities, both on location in the haunted home on Foxhill Drive and in the studio at Broadcasting House, the presenters routinely ask their audience to call in with supernatural testimonials and tips as a phone-in number is displayed at the bottom of the screen. With (real) veteran presenter Michael Parkinson[1] and (fictional) paranormal researcher Dr. Lin Pascoe on watch from the studio, events in the Early home become steadily more alarming. In the final moments of the program, Pascoe realizes that their broadcast has inadvertently enacted a nationwide séance, and the ghost who had been haunting the Earlys has spread to Broadcasting House and into homes nationwide. After a possessed Parkinson reads some final, ominously ambivalent lines off of a haywire teleprompter, the credits roll.

Following its first and only broadcast on British television, *Ghostwatch* and its producers were embroiled in controversy. Given the disturbing content of the show, some backlash had been anticipated, and so the BBC's standard 081 811 8181 call-in number was integrated throughout; viewers at home could call this number to hear a prerecorded message emphasizing the fictional nature of the program and be directed to one of half a dozen operators standing by to field questions and concerns. Holding an audience share of 11 million, the number of calls made throughout the show is often reported as 20,000,[2] although in a 1996 interview with *Samhain* magazine, *Ghostwatch* producer Ruth Baumgarten puts the amount at "over a million altogether."[3] This unanticipated and unprecedented number jammed the BBC switchboard, leaving

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[1] Those not familiar with British broadcasting from the late 20th and early 21st centuries may recognize Michael Parkinson from his cameo in Richard Curtis' *Love Actually* (2003); his inclusion gives an idea of Parkinson's establishment status.

[2] Robert E. Bartholomew and Benjamin Radford, *The Martians Have Landed!: A History of Media-Driven Panics and Hoaxes* (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2012), 50; Robert E. Bartholomew and Hilary Evans, *Panic Attacks: Media Manipulation and Mass Delusion* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2004), 82; *BBC Bite Back*. Season 1, Episode 13. Aired November 15th, 1992 on BBC1. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UUyhN-gq8xk; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vgrI5ZRuKdc.

[3] Richard Middleton, "The Ghost in the Corner 2," *Samhain*, issue 60, 1996, 12.

callers hearing only an engaged tone. The impact of this administrative underestimation was arguably exacerbated by the diegetic role of the telephone, where major plot points are revealed through phone-in tips. Themes of ghostly technological breakdown also appear throughout, with, for example, "Pipes" the poltergeist manipulating the footage feed from inside the house and causing studio lights to explode. Initial reporting by the British press was scathing. While the show was billed as a part of the *Screen One* anthology drama series and included "written by" and "starring" credits, *Ghostwatch* was – and continues to be – described as a hoax and a deliberate attempt to trick its audience. Baumgarten, executive producer Richard Broke, director Lesley Manning and writer Stephen Volk have remained adamant over the years that this was never their intention, conceding only that they overestimated the British public's media literacy.

Given the picture I have painted thus far, one could be forgiven for regarding *Ghostwatch* as a niche genre offering, the afterlife of which can be seen in other horror verité films such as *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) or the *Paranormal Activity* series (2009-2015). Left unreleased on home video for a decade after its broadcast, the British Film Institute's 2002 *Ghostwatch* DVD brought with it a cult following, including annual screening events and a website devoted to cataloguing spottings of the ghost Pipes.[4] The show has also been subsumed, alongside Orson Welles' *War of the Worlds* broadcast and chain emails about computer viruses, into the general category of media hoaxes and manipulation.[5] This article is intended neither as an account of the *Ghostwatch* fan community nor as a rehash of audience gullibility statistics in the face of unfamiliar media forms. Rather, I assert here that the circumstances of *Ghostwatch*'s broadcast open up a problematic that cuts across interpretation of narrative, information theory, and analyses of technical media. How can past moments of media-technical crisis be accounted for? To what extent are communications networks – in this case, the telephonic and the televisual – expected to function as producers of meaning? Do moments of crisis or breakdown undermine any search for meaning? Or, if we follow information theory to the letter, is such a search in channels of communication always a fool's errand?

Ghostwatch and the subsequent moral fallout on talk show stages and in newspaper columns is not simply a repetition of classic media misunderstandings

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[4] See http://www.ghostwatchbtc.com, which regularly updates with news related to *Ghostwatch*, including reports of the yearly National Séance, where fans host synchronized screenings of the program, pressing play at precisely 9:25PM GMT.

[5] See Murray Leeder's "*Ghostwatch* and the Haunting of Media;" Tom Steward and James Zborowski "(G)hosting Television: *Ghostwatch* and its Medium;" Rahel Sixta Schmitz "*Ghostwatch* and the Advent of Network Society."

(indeed, two of the books I cite here making such arguments regarding *Ghostwatch* feature a staged, soliloquizing Orson Welles on their covers). On the contrary, it is my contention that attending to the nebulous role of the telephone in *Ghostwatch* provides access to a series of crises: a moral crisis over appropriate subject matter on a publicly owned broadcaster, a technical crisis where communications networks break down, and a methodological crisis in the humanities regarding the limits of textual interpretation. While the fictional telephonic apparatus within *Ghostwatch* aims to both deliver plot points and signify ghostly presence in its breakdown, the real-time capacity of the network can keep up neither with caretaking nor with the production of meaning. While engaging liberally with horror tropes, most particularly the pubescent girl as an ideal conduit for the supernatural, I hold that such tropes are misdirection for the principal object of the program's critique: communication systems themselves, both technical and social, in Britain in the late 20th century. While analyses of *Ghostwatch* typically engage texts on media haunting – and most particularly Jeffrey Sconce's appropriately titled *Haunted Media* – as pivotal for their discussions, I am moving away from such an approach. Such methodological tautology ensures that *Ghostwatch* remains a curiosity case. I instead turn to Roland Barthes' use of information theory – and in particular the telephone as information technology – as a metaphor for parsing meaning in text, and onto Friedrich Kittler's assertion that information theory is precisely that which can offer literary criticism an escape route from hermeneutic approaches to texts. I argue here for a hybrid analytical approach: one that engages the interpretation of signs and meaning as well as with the channel capacity of communications networks.

Engaging canonical texts from "German style" media theory and "French style" (post)structuralist theory to analyze a very "British" television event, my aim here is to break ground between methodologies, taking this notorious and provocative media text as an illustrative entryway rather than a paradigmatic example. *Ghostwatch*'s nebulous relationship with communications technology as well as its narrative porousness is certainly part of its cult appeal, as are the unreproducible conditions of its 1992 broadcast. The question of "what happened" that night cannot be satisfactorily answered, and attempts to fill the chronicle remain at a loose end: this article takes as its task not a final account, a definitive interpretation, but rather a denouncement of final accounts themselves. Aside from the texts I have cited thus far, I must at this point also acknowledge the influence of Saidiya Hartman's critical fabulation on this line of thinking. Hartman, when confronted by missing information in archives from the transatlantic slave trade, refuses the desire to fill those gaps in with stories, to narrate that which cannot be known. Make no mistake: I am not making a direct comparison between my current project and Hartman's. Nevertheless, a question that

Hartman raises about the perceived necessity of complete history rendered in narrative is pertinent to us here.

In this article, I keep in mind not an ideal viewing subject – whether that be one completely convinced, wide-eyed, of the reality of what they are seeing, or a savvy cynic pointing to moments where there would have to be a cut in "live" footage – but through a hybrid approach imagine a contingent viewer who must take the interpretive reins. In so doing, I lean towards an allegiance with hermeneutic analysis, even while wrapping paratextual technical media into my interpretive purview. It is my view that Barthes, Kittler, and others I cite here demonstrate in their respective approaches that developments and integration of what Kittler terms *technical media* disorient methodological norms. Such disorientations necessitate reorientation, but not necessarily an entire methodological overhaul.

Barthes & Kittler: Information Theorists

In *S/Z* (1970), his ode to interpretation through a systematic reading of Honoré de Balzac's short story "Sassarine," Barthes establishes the language of information theory and communication to critique and break away from other (structuralist and proto-structuralist[6]) analysts of narrative. Rejecting the possibility that narrative forms can be analyzed through a cumulative science, which he argues flattens out immanent plurality of meaning, Barthes nevertheless turns to noise, information, and networks as prudent metaphors for elucidating the necessity of an interpretive relation to texts. Against the idea that any given text has a single pure and apparent meaning – that which is *denoted* – he proposes that there are also connoted, plural meanings. The various codes that Barthes identifies as moving through the text – hermeneutic,[7] proairetic, semic, symbolic, and cultural – form a network of meaning that the reader must decipher. In this manner, Barthes' informatic metaphors flip the central conceit of information theory: that, "semantic aspects of communication are irrelevant,"[8] or, as neatly summarized by N. Katherine Hayles, information is "a probability function with no dimensions, no materiality, *no necessary connection with meaning. It's a pattern, not a presence.*"[9] The "probability function" of information theory dictates that any

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[6] In the introduction to *S/Z*, Barthes does not directly name any of the analysts of narrative that he is critiquing, but makes allusions to Claude Lévi-Strauss and Vladimir Propp.

[7] Barthes has a rather idiosyncratic definition of hermeneutics. Instead of using hermeneutics as a general term for the interpretation of texts, Barthes' hermeneutics is a process of secrecy, lies and truth which opens and closes throughout a given story.

[8] Claude Shannon, "A Mathematical Theory of Communication," *The Bell System Technical Journal* 26, no. 3, (1948): 379.

[9] N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics,* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 18.

given channel transmits information in tandem with noise: the entropic excess that cannot be read as a pattern.

My identification of Barthes' use of metaphors of communication is not groundbreaking. This has been well covered by, for example, Hayles, Bernard Geoghegan, and Céline Lafontaine, who in their respective works have examined the history of the entanglements between what is broadly termed "French" theory and American cybernetics in the years following WWII. Emerging from within a particular knowledge paradigm, Barthes' coded, systems thinking of narrative reimagines the stakes of information theory. Borrowing concepts such as *noise* and *communication* as metaphors to describe the multivalence of texts, rather than do away with meaning, Barthes makes a strong argument for the necessity and power of literary interpretation. Writing two decades later, in the afterword to *Discourse Networks 1800/1900* – an extensive account of the processing, storage, and transmission of written texts in two epistemes – Kittler argues on the contrary that information theory offers literary criticism an opportunity to escape a purely hermeneutic approach to written texts in favor of "the literal materiality of the letter;"[10] examining the systems of thought facilitated by, e.g., the typewriter, the printing press. He proposes that "Whereas interpretation works with constants, the comparison between systems introduces variables."[11] Perhaps this is a statement that Barthes would in part agree with: his flipped informatic metaphors and comparison between his five systems of codes is precisely what enables him to reject notions that written texts have constant meanings.

Yet, as Florian Sprenger points out, Kittler was unaware of information theory while he was writing his *Habilitationschrift*, the document that would become *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*. Kittler's two prefaces – the first written in 1983 at the insistence of his dissertation committee, and the second of which, written in 1987, became the afterword in the English translation of his work, which I cite here – both introduce a shift in Kittler's thought towards a wholesale engagement with computation, and reveal that *Discourse Networks 1800/1900* "was written entirely in the absence of such influence."[12] This revelation is not necessarily an *aha* moment. The intervention of *Discourse Networks*, an experimental and ultimately very influential text for media studies, becomes readily expressible for Kittler through the *lingua franca* of information theory. Using the language of channel capacity and systems, Kittler does

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[10] Friedrich Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, trans. Chris Cullens and Michael Meteer, (Stanford: Stanford University Press 1990 [1985]), 370.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Florian Sprenger, "Academic Networks 1982/2016: Provocations of a Reading," *Grey Room* 63, (2016): 83.

not reformulate his poststructuralist project, but re-expresses it. To acknowledge that these two very different texts – the first that celebrates textual interpretation and hermeneutics, and the second that rejects the hegemony of interpretation of texts within the academy – both found information theory to be key for expressing their arguments is to acknowledge the mutability of information theory itself.

Although Kittler proposes that "literary criticism can learn from an information theory that has formalized the current state of technical knowledge,"[13] it seems that literary criticism had already been learning from information theory (although those lessons may not be the ones that Kittler would like to teach). It strikes me that while information theory is imperative for Barthes' development on how to decode texts, for Kittler it is an addendum to an already articulated project; albeit a project that benefitted from clarification, and an addendum from which emerged a highly influential school of thought. What is clear nevertheless is that both Barthes and Kittler use the informatic, and communication channels in particular, to make promises about their respective projects.

What we are left with, between Barthes and Kittler, is an open question about what can be done with information theory. Can it open up a new way to decode narrative conventions and signs that emphasizes a subjective reader? Or can it provide an entirely different way to approach media forms that rejects textual interpretation and takes the affordances of mediating technologies as conditions of possibility for discourse? The answer is: yes. Posited at midcentury as a universal science with infinite possible applications, what information theory can "do" is not necessarily the question. Kittler proposes that "information networks can be described only when they are contrasted with one another."[14] Although I balk slightly at identifying my current exercise as one of description rather than interpretation – which I suppose reveals my allegiance to the exercise of parsing meaning – this proposition does indeed open a field of inquiry. To return to *Ghostwatch*: instead of following the well-trodden argument about media manipulation, I ask instead: what can a comparison between the fictional telephone and the actual telephone tell us about crises of meaning making? What happens when a system of narrative is alloyed with a necessarily noisy information technology like a telephone network?

At this point, I must address the elephant in the article: what I am doing here is not literary criticism, but nevertheless speaks to the influence and inheritance of textual interpretation beyond the written word and into technical media. The comparison between systems – the first narrative and the second telephonic – I am

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[13] Kittler, *Discourse Networks*, 371.
[14] Ibid., 370.

proposing would be impossible if *Ghostwatch* were a piece of writing: the problematic I am attending to depends on a live interruption of a fictional media form by its functional, real-world analog. At time of writing (and, indeed, at time of *Ghostwatch*'s transmission), a ringing telephone on the page of a book cannot be answered. Making his distinction between *readerly* and *writerly* texts (where the readerly text is a product and the writerly text is a production, i.e., a process of interpretation), Barthes emphasizes that "the writerly text is not a thing, we would have a hard time finding it in a bookstore."[15]

I here take the *Ghostwatch* broadcast as a live, processual text on several levels: as a dramatic narrative coded as live, informative programming which requires on the fly interpretation by both its characters and the audience at home; as a televisual event that reads as happening in real time as well as being processually live on a signal-technical level; and, finally, in the telephone as a dually narratively coded function and an actual informatic apparatus. I am not proposing, however, that *Ghostwatch* fulfils a desire for a writerly text, a final answer to Barthes' prayers. To do so would be misguided: the project of the writerly text, of interpretation, does not come to an end, and cannot be concluded. It would also be painstaking, unrewarding, and most probably impossible to repeat the arduous analysis Barthes does on *Sassarine* on *Ghostwatch* in the several thousand words I have here at my disposal. I hold that what Barthes does in *S/Z* is at least in part a didactic exercise, and repeating it to the letter would miss the point.

Unlike the gramophone or the typewriter, Kittler never wrote extensively on the telephone, rather seeing it as a precursor to Edison's phonograph, grouping its channel capacities with that of the telegraph, and considering it as an example of both sensory extension and as containing the message-delivering capabilities of the post office via McLuhan.[16] I must caution here that I am not concerned with telephonic extension of the human ear or voice, as much as I am invested in the telephone as an informatic channel. This is not to say that the telephone as a hearing device and its channel capacities are unlinked: Mara Mills' work on the early 20th-century collaboration between the League for the Hard of Hearing and AT&T shows us that the term "noise" used to refer to interference on a channel by Claude Shannon in 1948 is shared with earlier work on standardization of the American telephone system. That Kittler did not devote great specific attention to the telephone is of little matter

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[15] Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Howard, (New York: Hill & Wang 1974 [1970]), 5.

[16] See Friedrich Kittler, "The History of Communication Media," *Ctheory*, (July 1996), https://journals.uvic.ca/index.php/ctheory/article/view/14325/5101; Friedrich Kittler *Gramophone Film Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz, (Stanford: Stanford University Press 1999 [1986])

to me here. Although not following a Kittlerian analysis to the letter, I nevertheless engage Kittler as a channel of thought, as offering a way of approaching technical media. The circumstances around the 1992 broadcast of *Ghostwatch* demand an analysis that attends to both questions of meaning formation as well as channel capacity. Considering briefly the association of the telephone with narrative crises, the remainder of this article is concerned with a step-by-step reading of the telephone as a narrative agent and information channel in *Ghostwatch*, followed by some comments on the critique of social and technical systems throughout the program.

Telephonic Narratives and Techniques

The telephone has enjoyed a prime position in narrative. In "An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative," Barthes proposes that "a narrative is made solely of functions: everything, in one way or another, is significant."[17] One such category in narrative Barthes refers to as "*cardinal functions*": hinges which point the narrative in a certain direction, an action that "opens or maintains or closes an alternative directly affecting the continuation of the story [...that...] either initiates or resolves an uncertainty."[18] His chosen example of a cardinal function is a ringing telephone: answering it (or not) will lead a story down a certain path. He cautions that fragments of narrative that seem superfluous are not: "Even though a detail might appear unequivocally trivial, impervious to any function, it would nonetheless end up pointing to its own absurdity or uselessness: everything has a meaning, or nothing has."[19] This Barthes, writing on the function of the telephone when it appears within a narrative, is quite different from the Barthes we have already encountered. Here, Barthes is implicitly thinking the channel capacity of the telephone insofar as it structures a story but does not engage information theory as an interpretive mode. Written a few years before *S/Z*, Barthes turns to Saussurean structuralist linguistics to work out an analysis of narrative. Even while acknowledging the initial failure of linguistics to account for language, Barthes posits that following its "basic model"[20] may help with producing a structural study of narrative.

For Barthes in his "Structural Analysis," the telephone both elucidates and introduces confusion, a dual capacity that is split between an individual character's interaction with their handset and the telephone network. The capacities of a fictional telephone toe a line with his later use, in *S/Z*, of the telephone as a metaphor for

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[17] Roland Barthes, "An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative," *New Literary History* 6 (1975 [1966]): 244.
[18] Ibid., 248.
[19] Ibid., 244.
[20] Ibid., 239.

networks of meaning within a story. On Sassarine's attempts to find out about La Zambinella, the object of his affections, Barthes discusses the crossing lines of information between different characters, who each provide their own account. He proposes that,

> "Like a telephone network gone haywire, the lines are simultaneously twisted and routed according to a whole new system of splicings, of which the reader is the ultimate beneficiary: over-all reception is never jammed, yet it is broken, refracted, caught up in a system of interferences."[21]

Rumor and whispers between characters in a pre-telephonic, early 19th-century story can, he shows, be read though the telephonic metaphor. Can the cardinal, open or closed narrative telephone be analyzed in a similar manner? If this synchronic, metaphorical non-jamming of different lines of communication in a written story is for the benefit of the reader, I ask: who benefits from the live suturing of a fictional hotline with actual infrastructure?

Writing a history of American cinema, Eileen Bowser proposes that there is a link between the development of new cinematic cutting techniques and the integration of the telephone into narrative film. In the early 20th century, "the telephone system was spreading across the land nearly simultaneously with the movies,"[22] and she argues that such expansion provided a technical model for formal experimentation. Commenting on Bowser, Tom Gunning notes that "[w]hile the earliest instances of extended parallel editing only occasionally portray telephone conversations, the fit between the spatio-temporal form of the event and that of its portrayal has a particularly satisfying effect which one suspects rendered the innovative technique particularly legible to film audiences."[23] Suspecting that the acceptance of the telephone into cultural life could enable acceptance of new editing techniques, Gunning pushes further by arguing that "[j]ust beneath the surface of the smoothly-functioning system" of telephonic infrastructure (and the uptake of its logic into cinema), "lies the threat of paralysis and impotence caused by its disruption."[24] That is, while formal experimentation may have taken up the time and space collapsing capabilities of the networked telephone, the placement of telephones in narrative signals immanent breakdown. In the footnote that precedes this

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[21] Barthes, *S/Z*, 132.

[22] Eileen Bowser, *The Transformation of Cinema, 1907-1915*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 64.

[23] Tom Gunning, "Heard Over the Phone: *The Lonely Villa* and the De Lorde Tradition of the Terrors of Technology," *Screen* 32, no. 2 (1991): 188.

[24] Ibid., 194.

observation, Gunning cites a paper given by Mary Ann Doane at the Columbia Seminar on Cinema in 1989. Doane developed this paper into the canonical "Information Crisis Catastrophe" (1990), wherein she argues that the televisual media event produces three different modes of apprehension: the titular information, crisis and catastrophe.

Gunning's employment of Doane in his account of cinema's telephonic terror in the early decades of the 20th century should be taken with a pinch of salt. Arguing that television must be defined by its relation to time – in its *liveness*, its "rigorous scheduling"[25] – she cautions that recourse to the spatial concerns of film theory is insufficient for the matter at hand. For Gunning, the communication breakdowns that point filmic narrative in a certain direction certainly are defined spatially: after burglars cut a telephone line, mid-conversation, a husband rushes home to save his wife, bridging a spatial gap. This is further evidenced in Bowser's suggestion that the spatial expansion of the spreading telephone network opens a representational space in cinematic technique. And yet on the subject of the televisual, Doane is clear that "television does not so much *represent* as it *informs*. Theories of representation painstakingly elaborated in relation to film are clearly inadequate."[26] With her move from representation to information, Doane deftly slips her register between the information theoretical and that which informs; that is, the operational capacity for the broadcast event itself, and its informative programming. *Ghostwatch* sits in this slip between the informatic and the informative in respect to both its coding as factual and its live suturing of fiction and actual telephonic networks. With that in mind, I return to the question of the narrative telephone, the telephone as interpretive metaphor, the telephone as an information channel. Moving into my final analysis, I approach *Ghostwatch* as no contemporary viewer could: with an eye on the network of meanings that cut across one another throughout the program.

BBC1, 9:25PM, Saturday October 31st, 1992

In its opening moments, Parkinson introduces *Ghostwatch* as an "unprecedented scientific experiment" into the supernatural, played out live on the BBC. He familiarizes the audience at home with the studio setup, which includes parapsychologist Dr. Pascoe and a phonebank overseen by presenter Mike Smith, before handing over to Sarah Greene on location. Greene tours the audience at home through the set-up of the Outside Broadcast Unit, which is ready and waiting to document paranormal phenomena. Boasting extensive surveillance cameras

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[25] Mary Ann Doane, "Information Crisis Catastrophe," in *New Media Old Media: A History and Theory Reader*, ed. Wendy Hui-Kyong Chun, Anna Watkins Fisher and Thomas W. Keenan, 2nd ed., (New York: Routledge 2016 [1990]), 309.

[26] Ibid., 309.

throughout the Early home, temperature monitoring equipment and thermal cameras, the technical apparatus is announced as the key to assessing the truth (read: getting empirical validation) of the haunting. As the program progresses, however, the OBU remains on the sidelines; it does not appear again until ten minutes to the end, after all hell has broken loose. Its function is misdirection, an announcement of technical credentials that have limited relation to the story that plays out. This task is taken up instead by Mike Smith and the phonebank.

Although Michael Parkinson as the presenter is ostensibly in charge of proceedings, Mike Smith is in control of gathering information from the general public via the team of operators managing the call-in line. It is information from the general public that invariably continues the forward thrust of the story. While the 081 number is introduced by Parkinson as a way for audience members to get in touch to share their experiences of the supernatural, the first call that is taken reformulates the role of the apparatus. Emma Stableford from Slough explains that she initially called in with a ghost story, but shifts gears and tells Parkinson and Pascoe that she saw a ghostly figure in a piece of footage from the Early home at the top of the show. Parkinson asks that the caller tell an operator exactly what she can see. Some minutes later, after Parkinson guides the investigation elsewhere and the show continues, they return to Smith, and he informs them that eight or nine more calls have come in corroborating what Stableford saw. Running the footage back three times, a figure is indeed shown standing in the background of a shot of the Early girls' bedroom in varying stages of transparency. From the clearly visible to only an outline, the viewer at home can see something that those in the studio seemingly cannot. Parkinson and Pascoe determine that there is no figure, a conclusion reached after using a state-of-the-art electronic pen to mark-up where a figure might have been seen, and chalk up the sighting as a case of mass pareidolia. Pascoe notes that "Human perception is such that the first thing you attempt to create in any abstract shape is a human face or form."

Here, Pascoe rehearses the argument for the pattern-creating capacities of human subjectivity, one which traverses the scholarly camps that I am engaging. Fredric Jameson opens *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* by proposing that narrative is the "the central function or *instance* of the human mind."[27] On the other side of the spectrum, in *Digital Memory and the Archive*, Kittler's student Wolfgang Ernst laments that "media-archaeological analysis itself sometimes slips back into telling media stories; the cultural inclination to give sense to data through

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[27] Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1981), xiii.

narrative structures is not easy for human subjectivity to overcome."[28] While Jameson posits human subjectivity and narrativization as an unconscious cognitive function as the ultimate horizon of his interpretive project, Ernst finds that his career-long desire to account for the micro-temporal processes of technical media are frustratingly undercut by his own human subjectivity, as well as the subjectivity of his readers. What is at stake here is not necessarily the perception of humanlike shapes, but instead human perception as it butts up against sense-making technologies, whether that technology is the analog written word, a microprocessor, or ghostly video playback.

Discussing the distressed reaction to *Ghostwatch*, producer Ruth Baumgarten notes that "at that time people had their own video recorders and video cameras, and we thought they were completely literate in those things and had absolutely no idea that people would carry on believing [after the opening ten or so minutes] that this was going out for real."[29] For Baumgarten, it seems that technical knowhow collapses into a collective, homogenized interpretive capacity. This is not Barthes' spindling, metaphorical telephone network, where the interpretive threads twist and counteract one another. Indeed, Baumgarten places the analytical onus on personal access to audiovisual recording technologies, which she alleges produces good consumer-interpreters, rather than on the request for information via telephone from a publicly owned, national broadcaster. Yet it seems that *Ghostwatch's* principal takeaway – *don't believe everything you see on TV* – proposes that there is no such good interpreter, no-one who can look at what they are seeing and know for sure. What is left to do? Why not call? There are no recordings of the telephone calls made to the BBC during *Ghostwatch*. Did those who got through tell their operator that they could see the ghostly figure? Did they see themselves as hinges, as narrative agents pushing the investigation forward? Diegetic callers certainly seem to, as does Suzanne Early, who takes matters into her own hands.

After a slew of supernatural activity in the Early home, a surveillance camera catches sight of Suzanne, the elder daughter of Pam, using the handle of a wrench to knock on exposed pipes, creating a series of loud bangs that echo throughout the house. Realizing she has been caught, she shrieks through sobs that she was only giving "you" – her mother, Dr. Pascoe, the BBC, viewers at home – "what you wanted": proof of the family's struggle, a good case study, a supernatural spectacle live on television. The dust settles, and Parkinson announces that *Ghostwatch* has been a failure. Nevertheless, Smith reports that even more callers have perceived a ghostly figure.

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[28] Wolfgang Ernst, *Digital Memory and the Archive*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2013), 56.

[29] *Ghostwatch: Behind the Curtains*, directed by Rich Lawden, (Lawden Productions, 2012), DVD.

Parkinson again asks the public to phone in, then the show cuts over to a prerecorded ghost story. The tape splutters and falters, and the action returns to Parkinson and Pascoe on the studio floor. With the next segment not yet set up, Parkinson switches gears and asks Mike Smith for a call. He passes one over from a woman who wishes to remain anonymous, who reports an injured husband, stopped clocks and children who are glued to the television, refusing to look away.

Ghostwatch hereafter takes a turn from suggesting that the haunting may have been faked by the Early daughters, to engaging wholesale with the supernatural phenomena in Foxhill Drive. Sarah Greene describes the temperature in the girls' bedroom as "like a meat locker," and Suzanne spontaneously receives multiple cat scratch-like marks all over her face. Parkinson quizzes Dr. Pascoe about what's happening in the house, and whether Suzanne's proximity to puberty could be a reason for her encounters with Pipes. Faltering with her reply, he answers his own question: "You don't know, do you?" She shakes her head: no. Mike Smith forwards them another call. From the other end of the line, Mary Christopher tells them about growing up in Northolt and being told stories about a Victorian baby farmer named Mother Seddons, who would drown the children in her care in copper barrels typically used for washing clothes. Christopher is sure that the railway terrace, since demolished, where Seddons lived is in the same location where the Early home now stands.

In the house on Foxhill Drive, Suzanne sits huddled in the corner of the living-room, attended to by her mother, and starts ventriloquizing a ghostly voice. Sarah Greene addresses the studio, forced to take out her earbud from the sound of electrical feedback. The house descends into chaos, lights flickering, and a soundman is knocked unconscious by a falling mirror. The feed cuts out for a few moments. When it returns, everything appears to be normal, and in the studio, Parkinson asks for one more call. The final caller, who wishes to remain anonymous, is put through. Announcing that he has information on the history of the house, Dr. Pascoe replies that they already know the history, and have information on the land going back to the Domesday Book. The caller explains that Mr. and Mrs. Sellers, two Foxhill Drive residents in the 1960s, illegally sublet a room to their nephew Raymond Tunstall after his release from psychiatric hospital. Not present on official records of the house, during Tunstall's stay he was plagued by voices and eventually took his own life in the cupboard under the stairs.[30] This final phone call, made by a man who identifies himself as Tunstall's

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[30] The disturbances experienced by Tunstall, as noted by his social worker, include feeling as if "there was a woman on the inside of his body taking over his thoughts and actions, making him do things he didn't want to do." It is not lost on me that *Ghostwatch* repeats the move perfected by *Silence of the Lambs* (1991), of the dangerous and perverse male female impersonator that is explicitly not

former social worker, is the last word from the diegetic public watching at home. What becomes apparent is that despite any research grants for parapsychological research or technical facilities, despite all access to the deeds of the Foxhill Drive house and the archives of the area, Dr. Pascoe could not have gotten to the bottom of the Early family's strife without the input of (partially) anonymous members of the public, who have in their collective memory information for which there is no record. Shortly thereafter, Parkinson announces that the switchboard has been jammed with calls, complaining that many have been hoaxes and pranks, and that lines are now closed. At this point, Dr. Pascoe realizes that their broadcast has performed a nationwide séance, allowing the poltergeist to manipulate the telecommunications network and be spread into homes nationwide.

Ghostwatch both informs and dramatically alleges to be reliant on individual audience members as inform*ants,* that is, *as narrative agents who are needed to continue the investigation, whose intervention depends on the 081 811 8181 call-in line as a communication channel.* Much of the evidence of the Early home haunting is prerecorded, including the video that (both actual and diegetic) audience members can see the figure of Pipes in. It is this watching public who intervene, to announce what they can see that Pascoe and Parkinson cannot, offering real-time interpretation of goings on via telephone. The calls coming in oscillate between acting as sources of information and constituting an "*information source* which produces a message or sequence of messages to be communicated,"[31] an electrical current that travels down a channel. Save for a few stray calls about flying sandwiches and broken glass coffee tables, in *Ghostwatch* the telephone also performs the *cardinal function* identified by Barthes of pointing the narrative in a certain direction.

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transsexual but nevertheless repeats transphobic tropes of invading female spaces and being a threat to defenseless, white women. It is neither lost on me that deceitful gender expression is a central concern of *Sassarine*, wherein La Zambinella, the object of Sassarine's admiration, is revealed not to be a woman but rather a castrato in drag. It is also not lost on me the extent to which transphobic discourse is built into British cultural life at its highest levels, and that it should be unsurprising that such a trope should be slipped into *Ghostwatch* with no comment. That crossed lines of communication are at play metaphorically in Barthes' analysis of *Sassarine* and functionally in the original transmission of *Ghostwatch* could be an analysis all of its own. One reason I did not present such a move here is because I want to sidestep such commentary (which could also include discussion of the Early sisters as analogues for the Fox sisters and the Rochester knockings, and the links between puberty in girls with supernatural conduct) in favor of considering the telephone as narrative tool and informatic channel. This is by absolutely no means to disregard such analyses, but in the case of *Ghostwatch*, a structuring concern with puberty and gender slips easily back into broad claims for media manipulation that I wish to avoid. Perhaps this is a question for another day.

[31] Shannon, "A Mathematical Theory of Communication," 380.

The story function of these stray calls points to the limited capacity of the telephonic apparatus. The operators are no longer able to distinguish useful calls that will help the investigation from useless ones, and the caller who reports that her husband has been hurt by broken glass prompts Parkinson to remind those watching at home to call the emergency services rather than the BBC. The diegetic telephone switches from being an auxiliary collector of other stories, a paratextual agent, to the primary mode of storytelling. The channel capacity of the BBC switchboard remains constant throughout the broadcast, but being sutured to the fictional line changes its role. The telephone in *Ghostwatch* becomes an overdetermined sign: symbolic and operational, the 081 number interpellates its contemporary British audience as both a declaration about the program's facticity, and as an instrument of state-sponsored care.

Interviewed for the 2012 documentary *Ghostwatch: Behind the Curtains*, Sarah Greene and Mike Smith recall their concern at having a callable number integrated into the show. Citing their experience with live entertainment and children's television, Smith notes that "we know the kind of reactions phone-ins get on air [...] you don't expect the people from BBC drama to understand that aspect of television."[32] Rather than maintaining that the BBC drama department don't understand the nature of phone-ins, I would argue counter to this that the writers and producers of *Ghostwatch* understood the narrative role of the telephone very well, as evidenced by Smith in his fictional role: forwarding calls to Parkinson and Pascoe, summarizing calls with similar content, reminding the general public to get in touch, and so on. Its cardinality becomes twofold: pointing the storyline in a certain direction, and also directing viewers to call into the "live" program. I would propose instead that what is not understood is the 081 811 8181 telephone number as public service, where it must maintain its operational capacity as information technology in the interest of the viewing public. While the fictional telephone can and must cease to function to announce the takeover by Pipes of the telecommunications network, the inclusion of such a breakdown in a BBC program combined with the failure of the actual network doubles down on the implicit critique of communication channels baked into the show.

The breakdown and failure of social and technical systems is a theme throughout *Ghostwatch*. Scared and confused by the sounds of banging throughout the house, the Early girls ask their mother Pam what is happening. Hoping to alleviate their worries, she tells them that the noise is just the water pipes hidden in the walls of the house. The specter, now suitably dubbed Pipes, becomes a synecdoche for a

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[32] *Ghostwatch: Behind the Curtains.*

series of systemic crises. These problems begin in the house itself, and indeed with the plumbing. Describing the effects of the haunting, Pam notes, amongst mysterious banging and broken crockery, a fetid stench coming from a tap and defective central heating. Contacting the local housing authority hoping to be moved, the Earlys are rejected.[33] Reaching out to local press, only to be ridiculed, before being contacted by Dr. Pascoe as research subjects, the case is finally brought to the BBC. The BBC is posited as a last resort, the state-sponsored and impartial power of which supersedes local government, independent press, and academic research. The power of the BBC is written into the show itself: it is the far reach of the BBC that enables the nationwide séance; indeed, the number of fictional operators manning telephones (ten) outnumbers the actual amount (six). Yet the actual technical breakdown undermines and overwrites the thematic breakdowns in the show, illuminating only the BBC as having failed in its duty to serve the public interest.

A few days after Hallowe'en 1992, the BBC itself covered *Ghostwatch* on right-to-reply program *BiteBack*. Framed by presenter Sue Lawley as a *War of the Worlds* for the 1990s, various audience members tell *Ghostwatch* producers Baumgarten and Broke that the show "betrayed the trust that the audience have within the BBC" in part by using Parkinson, "a well-respected and fatherly figure" as presenter, that it was "one sick joke," and that the contemporary setting of the show "made it most sinister, it was the background that most people in this country live in." With a central complaint being that many could not tell if the program was real or not, Baumgarten states that "Every possible way short of having arrows inside the program was taken to tell the audience that this is drama." It seems, however, that the prominently featured, dually cardinal 081 number upends paratextual markers of ficticity – features in *The Radio Times*, continuity announcements before transmission, "written by" and "starring" credits – through maintaining the obviousness of its function: to provide a direct link

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[33] In a post on *Ghostwatch* for his BBC blog, *The Medium and the Message*, documentarian Adam Curtis examines the program's factual precedents on BBC television from the 1950s onwards, where reports of hauntings and exorcisms were broadcast to local audiences. Curtis points towards a 1977 film about Dartford couple Ann and Barry Robertson, who have fled their haunted home. Having been refused permanent rehousing, and at their wit's end, Ann and Barry are left in limbo. The film features an interview with the council worker who has been charged with rehousing the Robertsons, who gives the camera a wry smile. He states, "The council will take a sympathetic attitude, [but] we can't, obviously, move people or transfer people simply because they think a house is haunted. The council's transfer points scheme doesn't recognize ghosts, and therefore they can't be pointed. Nevertheless, we feel that the Robertsons are sincere in their belief, and therefore we will help them when possible."

of communication with the BBC, and for that channel to offer care and assistance to whomsoever is calling.

> Barthes proposes that
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> "One might call *idyllic* the communication which unites two partners sheltered from any 'noise' (in the cybernetic sense of the word), linked by a single destination, a single thread. Narrative communication is not idyllic; its lines of destination are multiple, so that any message in it can be properly defined only if it is specified whence it comes and where it goes."[34]

Despite, as I have argued, a great many of the major plot points of *Ghostwatch* being revealed via telephone call, it would be a mistake to infer that each of these story functions are identical or somehow flattened out. Against Shannon's given definition of information as having no relation to meaning, and being "a pattern, not a presence" as glossed by Hayles, I propose that the network blockage on Hallowe'en night 1992 explodes meaning: the question of what critiques the unalloyed *Ghostwatch* may have aimed to show in its narrative are compromised with the introduction of the telephone network. Although, per Barthes, narrative is never *idyllic* in that it is always open to noise (if we assume in this instance Barthes takes noise to be disruption and confusion), the messages sent and received by the noisy, jammed BBC switchboard cannot "be properly defined" because it cannot be "specified whence it comes and where it goes."

Conclusion

In *Ghostwatch*, the telephone shifts between performing a narrative function, being a metaphor for systemic failure, a communication channel, and a public service. For those viewing on Hallowe'en night 1992, there is little time to decode and decide how the information relayed can be used, how it can be extracted from genre, when they are simultaneously being asked to provide information of their own. The exterior bounds of the *Ghostwatch* narrative are compromised by the placement within its diegesis of a callable number. Notwithstanding the telephonic breakdown, the reading of *Ghostwatch* after its broadcast as a "trick" or a "sick joke" puts the blame on the BBC for showing a program that requires interpretation.

In the spirit of the uncertainty that *Ghostwatch* produced upon its broadcast, and not wanting to make an exceedingly strong claim for an interpretive solution to the program that replaces media manipulation, in the last moments of this investigation I am leaving the question of any ultimate meaning up for further

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[34] Barthes, S/Z, 131.

discussion. It is tempting to allow the formal conventions of *Ghostwatch* – its documentary style, its use of real presenters, and so on – to take the analytical reins. But to do so is at best a stopgap and at worst a cop-out: to perform analysis on an unintentionally transmedial or info-narratively alloyed text such as *Ghostwatch* requires a turn to both theories of narrative and information. Performing what he calls a close reading of the electronic time image, Ernst proposes contra Doane and other theorists of television that, as a time-based medium, television's "liveness" is defined not "simply in the seriality of its programs, [but] as the mode of electronic line scanning yields images on the signal-technical level itself."[35] In moments of interlaced images or noisy static, the time-critical, information-processual nature of the televisual image becomes apparent in a way that, for Ernst, "is only superficially revealed on the iconological or narrative level."[36] Ernst insists here, and in his work generally, that narrative approaches to technical media are insufficient. I would counter this by arguing that occasion arises where we must crucially attend to the informatic and the narrative, and that these interpretive approaches need not be isolated from one another. In Shane Denson's recent *Discorrelated Images*, for example, he makes clear how the visible artefacts of digitally processed moving images – i.e., lag, glitches – become integrated into narratives, and create "a slippage between diegesis and medium."[37] Concerned with post-cinematic images, as his title clues us in on, I wonder where we might find non-visual lag and glitches that entice such a slippage, à la 081 number. The analytical line I have proposed here need not stop with *Ghostwatch*, which is just one example of a narrative-informatic media event, albeit one that hinges on a serendipitous collision of technologies. Where else might function explode into confusion, cardinal directions into networks of meaning?

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[35] Wolfgang Ernst, *Chronopoetics: The Temporal Being and Operativity of Technological Media*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield 2016), 123.

[36] Ibid., 136.

[37] Shane Denson, *Discorrelated Images*, (Durham: Duke University Press 2020), 154.

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