

## Seasonal Horror Traditions and Reflecting on Fear

This paper focuses on UK and US traditions of seasonal horror at Christmas and Halloween to consider how they provide opportunities for reflection on the causes of fear at liminal times in the calendar. These liminal times contain numerous traditions dedicated to looking back and forward, such as end of year reviews, or addresses from heads of state to the 'family' of the nation in which they consider the past year and look hopefully to the future. As part of these traditions, the seasonal horror story, whether delivered as an oral tradition, published, or broadcast, offers a clear opportunity to engage with causes of unease and fear. At the same time, it allows these fears to be diminished as they are treated as 'just entertainment', and traditional forms of the seasonal horror story are recreated as nostalgic pastiche or given a comedy treatment. Even here, these more-lighthearted renditions can allow audiences to engage with and work through issues that concern them in ways similar to those stories intended to cause fear, even if the fear itself is softened. Examples of such issues that have been dealt with through seasonal horror include disconnection from society in *A Christmas Carol*, the power of grief in *The Woman in Black*, or the power of the media in *Ghostwatch* or of technological change in *Black Mirror's* Christmas episode 'White Christmas'. Utilising these and other examples, this paper will outline the significance of narratives of fear as part of traditions of reflection at particular seasons.

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This research stemmed from a simple question. A friend introduced me to the BBC's 1970s strand [SLIDE] *A Ghost Story for Christmas*, which consisted of one episode each year from 1971 to 1978. I enjoyed them, then I thought about that title, and realised that the idea of a ghost story for or at Christmas did not seem strange. Which made me wonder *why* it did not seem strange.

So I have traced the Christmas ghost or supernatural story back through broadcast history, through literature, and into the vagueness of probably oral traditions. And from presentations on this, alongside my own research, it was pointed out to me that Christmas is seen as an unusual time for the scary supernatural in the US, and also in at least parts of Scotland and Ireland. The Christmas ghost story seems to be a primarily English tradition, with Halloween being the accepted time for scary stories in the US, Scotland and Ireland.

Of course, these are not the only times of year that horror stories are told, or broadcast. Supernatural stories can be enjoyed at any time, although their popularity tends to decline in summer, except in the case of Korea, [SLIDE] where a tradition has developed since the 1970s of film or television horror to act as 'chillers' against the summer heat. This may not just be down to the word-play, which I am assured operates in Korean as well as English, but may also connect to other storytelling traditions associated with summer festivals.

In the UK, though, [SLIDE] summer is also a less popular time for drama and television in general, let alone horror specifically. Before broadcasting, when people had to entertain themselves through the long winter nights, we encounter the idea of [SLIDE] 'winter's tales' as something told by grandams

to the family around the winter fire. Such winter's tales are often assumed, in mentions in fifteenth and sixteenth century dramas for example, to be fantastic stories of the supernatural.

But traditions don't survive the transition from oral culture, through literary culture, into broadcast culture if they don't still have value. And one value of the tale of fear in this instance is suggested by another common part of the end of year schedules and end of year practices: reflection. In the UK, national reflection is signalled **[SLIDE]** by the Queen's Speech to the Nations and Commonwealth, a tradition begun by the BBC back in 1932. This is accompanied **[SLIDE]** by shows looking back across the year's events, and by Christmas specials of series, as well as repeats of popular Christmas shows from the past. While there is certainly an element of looking forward at this period, the Christmas holiday is established in many ways as a time for looking backwards and reflecting.

So that's the general idea, but how does it play out in practice?

The particular benefits of the supernatural story in terms of reflection are twofold. One, they explicitly present an engagement with the past or with a representation of the feared thing, often in a metaphorical form. Two, they present it in the framework of entertainment, which allows it to be consciously dismissed as 'just a story', while the appropriate elements can continue to be engaged with on a conscious analytical or subconscious level.

The supernatural can act within these narratives to provide reconciliation and resolution of past, unresolved issues for the characters within the drama. The most obvious example of this comes in the numerous adaptations of **[SLIDE]** Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol, in Prose, Being a Ghost Story of Christmas*. In Dickens' short novel, the miserly Scrooge comes to respect the need for the free flow of capital throughout the system, and to understand that greater productivity can come from treating his staff well. In the adaptations, more focus tends to be placed on the importance of family, and the construction of social bonds rather than financial ones. This picks up on the idea of Christmas as being a time for family, while removing some of the specific social and historical context of the original novel. While the fear of poverty is not entirely removed from the adaptations, it is the fear of loneliness and separation from family that is emphasised, and that is resolved.

In the Christmas *Lark Rise to Candleford*, **[SLIDE]** the ghost of Cinderella Doe, a suicide, haunts the hamlet of Lark Rise and town of Candleford. The ghost's interactions with the characters emphasises the divisions and ties that exist between them, highlighting these relationships for the viewer, but also encouraging the characters to consider them themselves. Once again, the supernatural plays its part in encouraging reflection on relationships with family and neighbours, emphasising the fear of loneliness and of separation over any other fears.

The same fears play out in a more specific way in [SLIDE] the *Black Mirror* Christmas episode 'White Christmas'. What is more specific here is that the stories emphasise a fear of how technology is encouraging this loneliness and separation, itself part of the general fear of the dehumanising effects of technology, and also the antisocial aspects of social media practices. This is particularly demonstrated by the narrative which shows the 'blocking' ability of social media brought into everyday life, to make clear the potential effects of being ostracised on the person who is 'blocked'.

Similarly, in the Christmas episode [SLIDE] 'The House' of sitcom *Not Going Out*, the characters gather in an old Victorian house owned by a distant relative, in which the lead character, Lee, had spent his childhood Christmases. The house is about to be sold, the relative having died. Of course, the house appears to be haunted, until Lee's unreliable trickster of a father explains that he had staged certain events in order to bring him and Lee closer together, recognising that their relationship was strained. The fake haunting was all about generating reconciliation within the family. However, he also denies responsibility for some of the unusual events that had happened during the stay, and when Lee reminisces about spending happy childhood Christmases in the cellar playing with the neighbours' boy, his father points out that the neighbours didn't have any children. They flee the house, and a ghostly boy materialises in the rocking chair, looks into the camera and wishes the viewers 'Merry Christmas!'

The drive to have characters reflect on the past in a Christmas episode can obviously serve narrative and production functions. It may offer a chance for a cheap clip show, as characters reminisce 'remember when...' It provides a moment of pause in the onward flow of an ongoing series, in the same way that the Christmas holidays will provide a moment of pause in the onward flow of the daily lives of the viewers. It provides an opportunity for occasional, or new, viewers to catch up on the current state of the characters and their relationships. But by seeing the repeated representation of Christmas as a time for reflection by characters, this also reinforces the concept of Christmas as a time for reflection by the viewers, that this is the norm. While viewers may not have a supernatural intervention to encourage them to consider particular aspects of their lives, the idea that this is a time for looking back and trying to achieve a sense of resolution is still reinforced.

The resolution can apply to the characters, but in a way that can only be put together by the audience. For example, the first [SLIDE] *Downton Abbey* Christmas special included a subplot in which the belowstairs staff find and use a Ouija board. While initially there are tricks played with it, towards the end of the episode the two most trustworthy characters in the show, Daisy and Anna, decide to try the board on their own. It spells out a message, 'May they be happy. With my love.'

The next scene has Matthew proposing to Mary, with the implication being that the board was spelling out a message from his dead first wife.

As has already been noted, these reflections and resolutions that apply to the characters largely revolve around relationships, particularly family and neighbours or community, and the fears of loneliness and separation. These are clearly significant social fears, and fit particularly well with the conception of Christmas as a time for family and community. But they are not the only fears that are dealt with in seasonal horror.

As well as the technological fears of *Black Mirror*, we can see the fear of the effects of grief in the adaptation of [SLIDE] *The Woman in Black* scripted for ITV by Nigel Kneale, while other dramas focus on other fears and dislocations. In the Christmas special for horror anthology [SLIDE] *Inside Number 9* we were presented with what first appeared to be an affectionate (and superbly executed) pastiche of a 1970s television studio-shot horror drama. This was emphasised by the interjection of the plummy tones of the director of the piece, commenting on the action as if on a DVD commentary. However, it gradually becomes apparent that this is not the case, and that we are not being presented with a straightforward affectionate pastiche of somewhat cheesy horror, but that the supernatural horror drama that we seem to be watching is actually a real horror drama. It is a snuff film, in which someone is actually tortured and killed, and the 'commentary' is being delivered as part of a police interview.

The amusement and entertainment is drained away, the idea of supernatural horror as something fun is maintained, but we are presented with a horrible, mundane, non-supernatural crime. And that reinforces the idea that we need to look back and think about these horrors, not just enjoy the slightly scary ride, but consider *what* we are being entertained by.

And this, as I hope I have demonstrated, is all part of the use of fear as part of the wider process of reflection in the Christmas season. Similar considerations could be applied to other seasonal horror traditions, possibly with some adjustments to account for the specifics of culture and tradition; Halloween in particular is about policing the boundaries of accepted behaviour within the community. But the combination of a season which emphasises reflection and a genre which engages with social and cultural as well as personal fears emphasises this process of reflection and engagement with the causes and effects of those fears.