The Radical Ghost and Narrative Time

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Abstract
This article proposes to consider ghostly encounters and their relationship to narrative and time. It argues that the presence of the ghost within a narrative signals the potential for social and ideological change within the diegesis by its problematising of socio-cultural expectations of the ubiquity of linear time. The ghost can be understood as contradictory to linear time given its unique temporality. Within Western narrative fiction, linearity is often central to the progression and internal logic of narrative. Even if the elements of the narrative are presented 'out of order' in the diegesis, the audience is conditioned to reassemble them and interpret them linearly. The ghostly encounter, and its subversion of this cultural expectation by its existence within several timelines concurrently, draws attention to the construction and manipulation of time in the narrative. By existing contrary to this linear system, the encounter challenges traditional perceptions of temporal order. The ghost's explicit rejection of systems of linearity often serves as an implicit rejection of systems of oppression within the diegesis. The following article explores the degree to which the ghostly encounter in narrative fiction, film and television might be read as radical, or whether they champion individual freedoms and personal change, ultimately reaffirming systems of oppression. This article will consider this reading of the ghostly encounter with reference to Charles Dickens's A Christmas Carol *(1843*), *Pablo Larraín's film* Spencer *(2021) and the BBC television programme* Ghostwatch *(1992).*

Ghosts within a narrative signal the potential for profound social and ideological change by challenging established socio-cultural expectations of linear time. Their unique temporality, existing simultaneously within multiple timelines, contradicts the prevalent linearity often central to Western narrative fiction. By examining Charles Dickens's novella *A Christmas Carol* (1843), Pablo Larraín's film *Spencer* (2021) and the BBC television programme *Ghostwatch* (1992) as case studies, this article determines the extent to which ghostly encounters can be read as radical or if they primarily champion individual freedoms, thus upholding systems of oppression.

Linear time in this article is understood not only as how time is structured, that is, past present and future, but also in terms of the metanarrative as outlined by Jean Francois Lyotard. According to Lyotard, human history and culture are dominated by metanarratives, which are constructed through social and cultural legitimation. This process "confers legitimacy upon history" (Lyotard, 1979, p. 35) and suggests a continuous advancement in the material and spiritual state of humanity. Lyotard does not suggest that there is any truth to the idea of the metanarrative, only that its persistent recurrence cements it within the socio-cultural landscape. He claims that society is instead "haunted by the paradisaic representation of a lost 'organic' society" united by a shared "social bond" (Lyotard, 1979, p. 15). That the metanarrative is only

an idea, which haunts society, renders it no less potent. Lyotard (1979, p. 26) addresses the link between knowledge legitimation and oppression, writing that "a person does not have to know how to be what knowledge says he is". Disparity of access to knowledge is central to the construction of metanarratives that bolster systems of oppression.

Francis Fukuyama, in *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), outlines a metanarrative that might be considered in the context of knowledge and oppression. He argues that human history might be viewed as a linear evolutionary process, with the ascendency of neoliberal democracy at the end of the twentieth century signifying its superiority over other forms of government. Fukuyama's theory was criticised, most notably by Jacques Derrida in *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (1994)[1] where he rejects the idea of the metanarrative and posits that there can be no end to history. Derrida (1994, p. 127) describes the impossibility of "singing the advent of the ideal of liberal democracy and the capitalist market" when society is composed of "innumerable singular sites of suffering". He asserts that irrespective of progress made, ignoring this suffering, perceiving it as warranted within a wider context or even beneath consideration cannot be justified (Derrida, 1994, p. 127). In disputing Fukuyama's view that Marxism has been superseded by neoliberal democracy, Derrida (1994, p. 14) emphatically states that "There will be no future […] without Marx, no future without the memory and inheritance of Marx". Derrida's (1994) central thesis is that Marx's legacy will continue to inflect the world Fukuyama describes. According to Derrida, all history extends past the vanishing point of its temporal moment, echoing through time. He considers history to be "multiple and recurrent" (Derrida, 1994, p. 92), mirroring the nature of the events it comprises. Consequently, human history is populated with ghosts, who Derrida (1994, p. 220) understands as exhorting people to call for justice across time. He argues that these ghosts "are always there, […] even if they do not exist, even if they are no longer, even if they are not yet" (Derrida, 1994, p. 221). One of Derrida's primary criticisms of Fukuyama is that history cannot be defined in terms of epochs. For Derrida's ghosts, linear time does not exist. They are present and absent, here, and not here, always arriving and departing. Despite this fluidity, their demand for justice is unwavering, persisting amidst various forms of inequity such as "violence, inequality, exclusion, famine, and [...] economic oppression" (Derrida, 1994, p. 108). Derrida's ghosts represent those marginalised or victimised by the metanarrative of history, the revenants whose

[1] The original publication is Derrida, J. (1993) *Spectres de Marx: l'État de la Dette, le Travail du Deuil et la Nouvelle Internationale*. Paris: Galilée.

returns are assured (Derrida, 1994, p. 2). This notion of return is central to Derrida's (1994, p. 82) critique of Fukuyama's theory, which considers the neoliberal ideal as an event in linear time. Derrida (1994, p. 101) contends that if this ideal, this supposed pinnacle of human progress, emerges solely through the process of linear time, then the ghost, existing beyond linear constraints is ideally placed to disrupt this notion.

The ghost complicates linear time by its impossibility; it is the past invading the present, often intending to transform, dictate or herald the future. Western narrative fiction typically adheres to cultural expectations of temporal linearity, where audiences anticipate a clear beginning, middle and end. Even when these elements are presented 'out of order', audiences are conditioned to reassemble them in a linear fashion. This article contends that the ghostly encounter presents a subversion of this cultural expectation, highlighting the construction and manipulation of time in the narrative, by existing contrary to this system. The ghost's explicit rejection of linearity often serves as an implicit rejection of systems of oppression. However, the complete rejection of linearity can only occur if the hegemony of linear time is not restored after it has been undermined and if the power structures that relied upon its existence are destabilised. That is, if the metanarrative of forward progress, with all its attendant diegetic and extradiegetic mythos, is not re-adopted. The degree to which a text reverts to linearity might be taken as an indication of the radicality of the text and its capacity to subvert dominant systems of hierarchy and oppression. This article views the metanarrative as central to oppressive systems and argues that the rejection of linear time serves to disrupt them. Accordingly, this article explores the extent to which the ghost, representing ideological opposition to linear time, is synonymous with institutional critique. It also evaluates how this critique is undermined or upheld by the text's revaluation of temporal constructs by its conclusion. To illustrate the thesis, this article offers three examples: Charles Dickens's novella *A Christmas Carol*, Pablo Larraín's film *Spencer* and, finally, the BBC's mockumentary *Ghostwatch*. The selection of these particular texts is based on an attempt to demonstrate that this phenomenon is not isolated to any specific medium, such as literature, film or television, but more presciently, to highlight how it manifests in the different mediums of each text. This is not to advocate for the efficacy of one medium over another, but rather to highlight how non-linearity as a form of subversion is approached in each. Additionally, comparing the texts provides useful counterpoints to illustrate the varying degrees of subversive potency in each.

A Christmas Carol

Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, first published in 1843, is in itself a kind of haunting, returning as it does every year at Christmastime. As Brandon Chitwood articulates:

> We can view the Carol as not so much a cultural artefact but as an ongoing cultural process, one in which social pleasure is generated and reified via a curiously repetitive narrative of metaphysical despair. (Chitwood, 2015, p. 675)

The work has had a profound cultural impact, endlessly adapted and retransmitted across film, television, stage and literature. The text is situated within a familiar cultural dialogue of the cosy and quaint; a piece to be revisited during the Christmas season with the promise of reaffirming the potential for good in all people through the familiar touchstones of 'bah humbug' and Victoriana. Dickens did not popularise the Christmas ghost story, but he did write the most ubiquitous one. Ebenezer Scrooge, a wealthy businessman, has been selected for festive reconditioning and is visited by four ghosts: his former business partner Jacob Marley and the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Present and Yet to Come. Scrooge's refusal to donate to charity, celebrate Christmas and his mistreatment of his employee Bob Cratchit are entirely at odds with the values of the Ghosts of Christmas, given their focus on kindness and community. Furthermore, in the case of the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come and the ghost of Jacob Marley, they also emphasise the social and metaphysical disadvantages of leading a sinful life, and as such, the necessity of repentance. But Scrooge is not so dissimilar from his supernatural visitors. Arguably, Scrooge is well-placed to hear the spirits' message, because he is not unlike a ghost himself.

Scrooge's physical presence embodies traits commonly associated with ghosts. As Dickens describes:

> [Scrooge] carried his low temperature always about with him; he iced his office in the dogdays; and didn't thaw it one degree at Christmas […]. External heat and cold had little influence on Scrooge […]. Even the blind men's dogs appeared to know him, and when they saw him coming on would tug their owners into doorways and up courts […]. It was the very thing he liked. To edge his way along the crowded paths of life, warning all human sympathy to keep its distance. (2017, p. 2)

Paranormal investigators frequently describe temperature changes caused by supernatural entities, especially extreme cold. In an interview with *North Wales Live* (2018), paranormal experts Barri Ghai, Sandy Lakdar and Chris Fleming claim that "feeling a sudden, inexplicable change in temperature" can be indicative of a ghostly presence. Investigator Greg Newkirk, speaking with *Reader's Digest* (2023), reports the alleged effect of ghostly presences on animals, which causes them to behave erratically, reacting to stimuli their owners cannot see. One might consider the character of Spider, the small, loyal terrier who accompanies Kipps in

Susan Hill's *The Woman in Black* (1983), or the black labrador Gyp in Sarah Waters's *The Little Stranger* (2009). Both animals react to ghostly presences long before the central human characters begin to comprehend them. In addition to these parallels, the reader is informed that Scrooge often answers to the name 'Marley'. Dickens explains that:

> Scrooge never painted out Old Marley's name. Sometimes people new to the business called him Scrooge, and sometimes Marley, but he answered to both names. It was all the same to him. (2017, p. 2)

Scrooge also resides in Marley's old home, and as Dickens (2017, p. 7) notes, Scrooge and Marley were "two kindred spirits". The opening of the text, with its firm iteration of Marley's death, challenges the fixity of the past, by calling the finality of death into question. Marley is dead and yet re-animated as Scrooge, while Scrooge, in turn, lives as Marley, suspended in a state of half-life. Indeed, it is Scrooge's similarity to Marley in his ethics and conduct that summons the ghosts.

The ghosts in *A Christmas Carol* are predominantly associated with time, appearing to Scrooge as the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Present and Yet to Come. Scrooge's instruction relies upon the manipulation and distortion of time. As Chitwood (2015, p. 676) explains, "it is their lessons and their ability to give Scrooge the semblance of a life lived multiply and simultaneously" that resonate most deeply. When viewed in this light, the spirits' lessons echo Derrida's (1994, p. 92) "multiple and recurrent" sites of suffering. The ghosts offer Scrooge a chance to engage with time and the nature of human suffering in a non-linear context, suggesting the potential of this perspective in destabilising hegemonic metanarratives about power and class.

A Christmas Carol actively promotes charity, kindness and forgiveness, particularly towards the working class. Scrooge's assertion that the poor should take themselves to prisons and workhouses is rebuked by the Ghost of Christmas Present, who places blame for the poverty endured by the Cratchit family on Scrooge, as an irresponsible and unethical employer. The spirit, when insinuating that this will be Bob Cratchit's son Tiny Tim's last Christmas and seeing Scrooge's horror at this presentiment, reminds Scrooge of his pronouncement about the poor: "If [they] be like to die, [they] had better do it and decrease the surplus population" (2017, p. 52). At which point Scrooge is "overcome with penitence and grief" (2017, p. 52). *A Christmas Carol* is an unabashed reproof of the view of poverty and criminality as symptomatic of moral or intellectual inferiority. It warns against the dangers of Ignorance and Want, in the form of two children, who are introduced to Scrooge by the Ghost of Christmas Present. The spirit cautions that Ignorance, the sin that Scrooge has been most guilty of, is the greater threat

of the two. The spirit exhorts Scrooge to "Deny it! […] Slander those who tell it ye! Admit it for your factious purposes and make it worse" (2017, p. 64). The inclination to critique the institutions of wealth and individuals, like Scrooge, who exploit ignorance for their "factious purposes" and perpetuate poverty is inherent to the ghosts and is directly tied to their ability to enable Scrooge to step outside his current place in time. The spirits are the custodians and representatives of time. They contain the past, present and future multitudes of themselves, as well as the lives lived within them. The ghosts embody the entirety of human experience (or at the very least, a white Victorian one) at Christmastime and the diversity of experiences that this accommodates. Some are affluent and comfortable, exemplified by Scrooge's nephew Fred, while others are bleak and impoverished, like the residents of the mining village. As containers of this collective experience, the ghosts can destabilise hegemonic narratives by revealing extremes of wealth and poverty, thus disrupting Scrooge's limited understanding of Christmas celebrations with a more nuanced perspective.

It is worth noting, however, two caveats. The first is the ghosts that are not included in the Christmas family tree, i.e. The Ghost of Christmas that Would Have Been or The Ghost of Christmas that Never Was. The ghosts in *A Christmas Carol* deal only in fixed temporalities. While the role of Christmas Yet to Come might be read ambiguously, given that Scrooge may be able to "sponge away" (2017, p. 82) his past misdeeds, the reader is given to understand by the novella's conclusion that any change that has occurred is a direct result of Scrooge's actions in the present. The second point to consider is the tripartite nature of the ghosts. The most obvious association is with the Christian Trinity, but comparisons can also be drawn to the Norns of Norse mythology or the Fates of Greek mythology. When viewed in these contexts this tripartite quality often signifies omniscience. In Christian doctrine, for example, God is understood to have a view of time which extends from the beginning to the end of time. Emily Paul, writing on divine atemporality, explains that:

> the classical view of God's relation to time […] deems Him to be atemporal: He exists 'outside' of time and views all events in time as if in one 'simultaneous present'. (Paul, 2019, p. 2)

Despite their religious associations, including their threefold nature, focus on Christian values and redemptive mission, the ghosts of *A Christmas Carol* do not embody this omniscient capability. When Marley informs Scrooge that he will be visited by three ghosts in succession, Scrooge asks "Couldn't I take 'em, all at once and have it over, Jacob?" (2017, p. 20) However, the ghosts' timelines do not overlap, and when their lessons have been taught, they place Scrooge back at Christmas morning in his present time. Even with Scrooge's assertion that he

will live "in the Past, the Present, and the Future" (2017, p. 82) the reader still understands these temporalities as distinct. They form the basis of a narrative of progress—a metanarrative; the sinner's salvation hinges on the existence of a fixed past from which he must be redeemed. This fixed narrative time is further expanded upon in the novella's conclusion, and it is this rigidity and the resulting metanarrative that reduces the radical potentiality of *A Christmas Carol*'s ghosts.

A Christmas Carol begins by establishing Scrooge's marginality within his society. He elects not to take part in the institutions of family, community and even Christmas celebrations. However, by the end of the story, Scrooge enthusiastically embraces all three and becomes a philanthropist. As Audrey Jaffe writes:

> The culture from which Scrooge has been absent is, of course, commodity culture; his failure to participate in human fellowship is signaled by his refusal of, and need to learn, a gift-giving defined as the purchase and exchange of commodities. (Jaffe, 1994, p. 261)

After waking on Christmas morning and praying, Scrooge engages in a series of capitalist activities, many aimed at enriching the Cratchit family. Ultimately, Scrooge begins "furthering the enfranchisement of the middle class" (Chitwood, 2015, p. 683). Hugh Cunningham notes a shift in attitudes towards philanthropy in the mid-Victorian era, where the concept became less associated with evangelism and its connection to capitalism became more prominent (2020, p. 131). The reader is encouraged to interpret Scrooge's behaviour as overwhelmingly positive: he alleviates the material wants of the Cratchit family and, by implication, saves Tiny Tim, from an untimely and avoidable death. While Scrooge's actions affect beneficial change, they remain limited in scope and do not address systemic societal issues. Mary Beth Raddon (2008, p. 38) observes that philanthropic actions are dominated by "private visions of the public good" and tend to reflect the social class of the donors. Scrooge does not disavow the social structure that enabled him to amass wealth or exploit the Cratchits through debt and low wages. Although the reader is led to believe that Scrooge continues his charitable behaviour for life (2017, p. 89), he simply improves the conditions of capitalism, thereby reinforcing its legitimacy and perpetuation. While *A Christmas Carol* challenges linear time, it ultimately upholds the metanarrative of linear time as essential to the Victorian ideal of middle-class progress. The text proposes that escaping poverty does not necessitate the dismantling of the systems that engender it. Instead, it involves integrating into a continuum of human experience moving towards an idealised future, without poverty, under those same systems. Thus, although linear time is undermined within the diegesis, it is reaffirmed at the story's conclusion. The text favours the idea that the ghosts only needed to enlighten Scrooge on how he could become

a more efficient part of the capitalist system. In this way, his past becomes a fixed event from which he progresses, and the institutions that enabled his wealth to remain intact, securing his present and future as a man who is "as good a master […] as the good old city knew" (2017, p. 89).

Spencer

The 2021 film *Spencer*, directed by Pablo Larraín, is a fictionalised account of Lady Diana Spencer (1961–1997), portrayed by Kristin Stewart, during a royal family Christmas at Sandringham in 1991. The film details Diana's personal struggles, including her husband Prince Charles's infidelity, her co-dependent relationship with her young sons and her strained interactions with both the royal family and their staff. *Spencer* is less a biopic than a psychological portrait, detailing Diana's fractured mental state in scenes depicting both ideation of and actualised self-harm. The fact that *Spencer*, like *A Christmas Carol*, is also set at Christmas deserves consideration. Christmas is "multiple and recurrent" (Derrida, 1994, p. 92), a haunting where familiar figures, traditions and events reappear annually and demand acknowledgement. In *Spencer*, the implication that this will be Diana's last Christmas as wife to the future king and her last with the royal family challenges the supposedly cyclical nature of Christmas. Diana's attempts to break from tradition extends to challenging history itself, as exemplified by the central ghostly encounter of the film. Diana is visited several times by the ghost of Anne Boleyn (c. 1500–1536), whose involvement in breaking with tradition (specifically, with the Church of Rome) had profound and lasting consequences on the future of Europe.

Diana's haunting by Anne Boleyn is compelled by two factors. Firstly, Diana claims a distant familial connection to the Boleyns. Secondly, she acknowledges a parallel between her own life and Anne's, as both women were sidelined by British monarchs in favour of other women. Anne's appearances become increasingly involved as the film progresses. She initially appears as a silent spectator sitting across from Diana at the dinner table. Later, she speaks to Diana, calling her by name. In one scene, as Diana escapes Christmas dinner, Anne is shown rushing through Sandringham House. These shots are intercut with scenes of Diana doing the same, blurring the visual and temporal barriers between the women. Both say—"tell them I'm not well"—before Diana is seen dressed as Anne, standing where Anne had been moments before. The final exchange between the women occurs in Diana's childhood home, Althorp House, where Diana, contemplating suicide, is confronted by Anne, who tells her:

> You know he gave her a picture of himself, a miniature painting. She wore it around her neck. Same as the one that I wore around my neck. So, I just tore it off.

Anne is speaking about Jane Seymour (c. 1508–1537), who replaced her as Henry VIII's (1491–1547) wife. Anne tearfully urges Diana to "Go. Run." Diana then rips off a pearl necklace, a Christmas gift from Charles, which he has also given to his mistress, Camilla Parker-Bowles.

As mentioned earlier, the connection between Anne and Diana portrayed in the diegesis is rooted in both a familial tie and material similarities in their lives. However, they are also linked by the systems of oppression that they experienced. Both were tasked with maintaining the monarchy's stability through childbirth, and both were ultimately deemed expendable. Larraín's depiction of these two women, who lived some four centuries apart, highlights a failure to view women as anything beyond commodities, which reflects shortcomings not only within the British royal family but society at large. Diana poignant remark in the film, "its currency, that's all we are," underscores the thematic correlation of wealth and suffering in *Spencer*. Currency becomes synonymous with trauma, particularly the trauma inflicted on female bodies and the generational wealth that it secures. This trauma in turn is closely tied to concepts of failure.

The opulence of Sandringham House provides a stark backdrop to Diana's inner struggles. Larraín presents wide shots of rooms filled with antique furniture, gilded mirrors and floor-to-ceiling windows. Despite the meticulously prepared meals consisting of organic vegetables and game from the royal family's estates, Diana's experience with food is tainted by her struggle with bulimia, revealing how the façade of wealth and privilege can mask profound personal turmoil, in Diana's case her desire to remove herself from an oppressive system. This portrayal aligns with Derrida's theory, where he explores the need to keep death localised following trauma. His invocation of the cadaver serves as a metaphor for societal attempts to suppress and contain failures (Derrida, 1994, p. 120), Diana's failure to eat, to arrive to events on time, to accept her husband's infidelity. This aligns with Derrida's wider critique of Fukuyama (1992), who champions Western liberal democracy while ignoring historic and contemporary failures. As stated earlier, Derrida (1994, p. 106) contends that historical atrocities cannot be overlooked regardless of progress, and that suffering persists. Fukuyama, in Derrida's view, clings to the promises of a future that have never materialised. The role of the ghost, both according to Derrida and in *Spencer*, is to repeatedly confront society with the failure of the hegemonic metanarrative until it is acknowledged. Anne becomes the unlocalised cadaver, defying containment and posing a threat to the institution by virtue of her

manifestation and her continued influence on history despite the monarchy's attempts to remove her from it. Her presence exposes the myth of succession and the false promise of continuity associated with monarchistic rule attendant to exploitation particularly of female bodies. This system requires female obedience, both in behaviour and in the perceived obedience of their bodies in giving birth to sons. Both Anne and Diana attempt to fulfil this prescribed role. Where Anne fails, Diana succeeds, but Anne's presence speaks to the cost of that success. The price Diana paid was steep, impacting her freedom, mental health, relationship with her children and self-identity. In essence her role curtailed her humanity and reduced her to a tool. To fit the mould of 'correct' womanhood demanded by the regime, Diana's "innumerable sites of suffering" (Derrida, 1994, p. 127) her dissatisfaction with her marriage, her bulimia, even her personhood must be ignored, to protect the futurity of the royal family, her failure, must be overlooked.

Diana's death in 1997, along with the ensuing global outpouring of grief and enduring fascination with her life, could also be said to haunt the narrative. After her interrupted suicide attempt Diana runs, as Anne suggests, but the viewer is conscious that any freedom she attains will be short-lived. Time emerges then as a central tension of the narrative. One interaction between Diana and her sons makes explicit reference to this. Diana says:

> You know at school you do tenses? Well, here, there is only one tense. There is no future. The past and the present are the same thing.

Spencer is set at Christmas 1991, prior to the royal family's '*annus horribilis*' of 1992.[2] Similar to Ebenezer Scrooge, the royal family faced a bleak future symbolised by the Spirit of Christmas Yet to Come. Their implicit rejection of the future, evident in their adherence to archaic traditions and hierarchical structures of inheritance, may be interpreted as an attempt conceal historic violence and abuse inflicted upon the exploited peoples who secured the family's status. Considering this, Anne Boleyn's presence within the diegesis goes beyond indicating similarities with Diana's life; it underscores a system of oppression upheld by linear time. Monarchy persists by virtue of its ability to progress through time. Anne's intrusion disrupts accepted monarchistic notions of succession by highlighting one of its most enduring martyrs. Anne is a woman from the British monarchy's past, invading its present in an attempt to dictate its future. The real disruption, however, is achieved within Larraín's characterisation of Diana, who through an extended montage scene following her suicide attempt, where she

[2] Queen Elizabeth II (1952–2022) famously dubbed 1992 an '*annus horribilis*' due to three of her four children, Prince Charles, Prince Andrew and Princess Anne, separating from their spouses, along with scandalous tabloid reports and a devastating fire at Windsor Castle.

appears and reappears on screen in multiples of herself; as a child, a teenager, a bride and a mother, comes to be seen as fractured by, and composed of, time. By the end of the sequence, she is not simply Diana, Princess of Wales, but all her past and future selves too. To paraphrase Dickens (2017, p. 83), the Past, the Present and the Future all strive within her.

Spencer subscribes to an anti-royalist ideology that critiques inherited wealth and extreme privilege. However, the film's implicit and explicit acceptance of class structure undermines the efficacy of this argument. While effective in dismantling linear time, the film confines Diana's potential liberation within the container of privilege. Despite Diana's meaningful relationships with her dresser Maggie and the chef Darren, they can only offer her comfort. Darren reassures an increasingly paranoid Diana of the staff's wishes for her happiness. Diana hardly listens, asking him if he has read the *Vogue* article about her. His efforts to connect with her are flatly ignored as he becomes a vessel for Diana's moribund musings. The dynamics in Diana's relationship with Maggie are similarly weighed in Diana's favour. Maggie confesses her love for Diana during a trip to the beach, admitting that she does not expect Diana to reciprocate these feelings. Diana Taylor observes that:

> Diana's life, death, funeral, and afterlife as a quasi-sacred relic on display illuminates the way that multiple, intersecting social dramas encapsulate many of the tensions of our time. All sorts of issues-ranging from eating disorders to unhappy marriages, to AIDS, to the workings of the media, to neocolonialism, to globalism- seem magically incarnated in her image. The tragic employment of the events surrounding Diana, and the theatricality of the staging, transmitted internationally, create the illusion of a cohesive, "universal" audience. (Taylor, 1999, p. 62)

In *Spencer*, Diana's multifaceted public image contrasts with the personal cost borne by individuals, particularly those whose labour sustains her lifestyle. Despite Diana's support for LGBT communities, the film depicts her personal reaction to Maggie's confession as one of light-hearted uninterest, disregarding the power imbalance in their relationship. This portrayal obscures the labour contributed by individuals like Maggie, both emotionally and practically, despite the unequal dynamics at play.

The most prescient example of this concealed labour is Major Alistair Gregory, the Queen's equerry, whose relationship with Diana is antagonistic. He insists that she be weighed upon arrival at Sandringham, a Christmas tradition that Diana finds uncomfortable. Gregory monitors her movements, even interrupting her late-night binge. If the central conflict of *Spencer* is time, then it is in the drastically different perceptions of time as held by Gregory and Diana where this tension is most evident. Gregory is charged with managing the royal household and that influences the flow of time within it. Notably, Gregory is instrumental in drawing Anne into the narrative. When Diana arrives at Sandringham, she finds a biography

of Anne Boleyn in her room. Shortly after beginning to read it, she encounters Anne for the first time. Diana accuses Gregory of leaving the book as a warning, though he denies any knowledge of it. However, it is strongly implied that Gregory placed the book in Diana's room, as he is later shown returning it to a bookshelf. Willingly or unwillingly then, he is partly responsible for her liberation. In one exchange between Gregory and Diana, it is learned that Gregory served in Northern Ireland during the Troubles where he witnessed his friend being fatally shot. He professes that his belief in the idea of the crown, rather than the people, sustained him during that period. Diana's emancipation from the burden of embodying an idea is facilitated by Gregory's labour. However, this liberation speaks to a continuation of class hegemony, as it comes at the expense of those who labour within hierarchical structures. Therefore, the metanarrative that supports inherited wealth and hierarchical institutions is maintained.

Taylor, reflecting on Diana's death, notes the shift in public perception towards her. While many felt an emotional connection with Diana, upon her death:

> her sudden uniqueness, her tragic magnitude, allowed us to forget for a moment that she was also very much the product of a long history of collective imaginings that have normalised heterosexuality, glorified maternity, fetishized youth and femininity, glamorized whiteness. (Taylor, 1999, p. 62)

Diana remains a symbol of the hierarchical class structure, which she participated in. The haunting of *Spencer* offers Diana an escape because of her princess title, not despite it. The narrative's normalisation of class structures, which is evident in the marginalisation of the working-class narratives, suggests that Diana is perceived as worthy of salvation due to societal perceptions of her superiority. Anne Boleyn, the ghost acting as a guardian angel, saves Diana but leaves the monarchy unharmed. In an exchange which is most indicative of *Spencer*'s defence of the *status quo,* Maggie says to Diana "They can't change. *You* have to change". The message is clear: Diana may change but the system will plough on regardless.

Ghostwatch

In June 1992, Stephen Volk, the writer of *Ghostwatch*, submitted his final script for the programme to the BBC. The script opened with a statement spoken by a cousin of Terry Waite, a hostage victim of the Islamic Jihad Organisation, released after four years in 1991: "I'll only believe it [news of Terry's release] when I see it on TV". In an interview with Kate Mossman (2017), Volk describes the choice to include that quote as ironic. He baulks at the idea of "TV being the font of truth, and trusted implicitly, particularly the BBC". When *Ghostwatch* aired

on TV for the first and only time on Halloween night in 1992, there was nothing on the BBC, or indeed the wider TV landscape, that could truly have primed viewers for what they saw. To describe *Ghostwatch* as a mockumentary is potentially misleading. Rather than playing with form to highlight the unreality of the diegesis, *Ghostwatch* attempts believability throughout. The programme presents itself as a live broadcast from a haunted house in London, where the Early family, consisting of mother Pamela and daughters Suzanne and Kim, are purportedly terrorised by a ghost named Pipes. The narrative unfolds across two primary settings: the live broadcast from the Early's residence in the Foxhill Drive housing estate in London, led by former *Blue Peter Presenter* Sarah Greene, with Craig Charles stationed outside collecting interviews, and a studio segment hosted by Michael Parkinson at the BBC studio. In the studio, Michael Parkinson is joined by parapsychologist Dr Lin Pascoe (played by Gillian Bevan), while Sarah Greene's husband, Mike Smith, presides over a 'live phone-in', although these calls were pre-recorded, like the rest of the programme. *Ghostwatch* also features 'archive' footage, captured by Pascoe and her team of parapsychologists, which she presents as evidence of the veracity of the Early family's claims that they are facing a supernatural threat. As the broadcast progresses, the supernatural occurrences intensify and culminate in a complete takeover by Pipes, who gains control of the cameras and broadcasting equipment to transmit his message directly into homes across the country—a literal ghost in the machine.

Kate Mossman underscores the extent to which *Ghostwatch* was believed to be a genuine documentary broadcast and its impact:

> Many of the 11 million who saw *Ghostwatch* were children. Sarah Greene went on Blue Peter the following week to reassure young viewers that she was unharmed. Five days after the program's transmission, an 18-year-old boy with learning difficulties, Martin Denham, hanged himself, having fallen into what his stepfather described as a trance. He had become obsessed with *Ghostwatch* and was convinced that there were ghosts in the water pipes of his Nottingham home. (Mossman, 2017)

One might consider the programme's believability to be secondary to how it subverted the notion of belief itself. This is exemplified less in the tragic death of Martin Denham and the cases of post-traumatic stress disorders in children ascribed to the show (Mossman, 2017) but rather in the wider negative public reaction to the programme. Following the airing of *Ghostwatch*, its producers, Ruth Baumgarten and Richard Broke, appeared on BBC One's *Biteback*, a consumer watchdog show, to defend the programme and themselves and to apologise to the nation for the distress the programme caused. Additionally, Will Wyat, the BBC's then managing director, initiated an inquiry and commissioned a report, which has

subsequently disappeared (Mossman, 2017). The backlash against *Ghostwatch* reflects a response to a novel style of broadcasting. Mossman points out that:

> After Ghostwatch, found footage, infrared camerawork and surveillance became staples of the horror genre: the makers of the 1999 film The Blair Witch Project claim it as an inspiration. (Mossman, 2017)

However, when the programme aired, these techniques were just emerging. Mossman (2017) observes that the infrared cameras, used to film chaotic scenes inside the Early home, had recently been introduced for the BBC's coverage of the Gulf War (1990–1991). They gave the impression of absolute veracity, by virtue of their visual connection with the institutions seen as purveyors of objective truth. This aligns with Lyotard's concept of legitimation (1979, p. 26). The BBC had access to knowledge and their role as a public institution was to disseminate it for the public good. However, its Gulf War coverage revealed inconsistencies in information sharing in accordance with public interests This tension between perceived truth and the reality of media coverage is central to *Ghostwatch*'s interrogation of institutional power. Indeed, director Lesley Manning was drawn to the project by her dissatisfaction with the triumphant portrayal of the Gulf War by the BBC the previous year (Mossman, 2017). Manning's disgust at this portrayal influenced her presentation of the fallibility of media apparatus in *Ghostwatch*.

There are other notable parallels between *Ghostwatch* and the BBC's coverage of the Gulf War. One interesting comparison is that between Sarah Greene and Kate Adie, a BBC war correspondent who reported from Iraq in 1991. Though there are some visual similarities between the women (both are white and have blonde hair), their professional backgrounds differ significantly. Adie was known for her on-the-ground coverage of various conflicts, including the 1980 siege of the Iranian Embassy in London, the Troubles in Northern Ireland and the Tiananmen Square Protests in China in 1989. Conversely, Greene was best known as a presenter on *Blue Peter* and other daytime television programmes. Despite this contrast, Greene's "live from Foxhill Drive" segment in *Ghostwatch* frequently recalls Adie's war reporting. In their analysis of one of Adie's broadcasts from 1991 Angela Smith and Michael Higgins (2021, p. 210) describe the focus that the BBC placed on Adie's "well-being and professional subjectivity" in interviews with the studio hosts. Additionally, they note that Adie's broadcasts featured "explicit discussion of the apparatus" (Smith and Higgins, 2012, p. 210) emphasising infrared and satellite technologies, which connected to the BBC's studio. Smith and Higgins articulate that:

> the processes and limits of technology continue to be a recurring theme in all of the live broadcasts, including indirect references to the dependency of the dialogue on satellite radio. (Smith and Higgins, 2012, p. 210)

These observations echo scenes from *Ghostwatch*, particularly the initial 'live' broadcast where Greene introduces the team and demonstrates the infrared camera and ghost detection equipment. Smith and Higgins (2012, p. 212) also note the "emphasis on immediacy" created by the live broadcast. They argue that the nature of this broadcast, which would seem to place the reporter at the heart of the events as they unfold, reveals "discursive strategies of emotionality and revelation at play" (Smith and Higgins, 2012, p. 212). This choreographed emotionality is part of what so "appalled" Manning about the BBC's coverage of the Gulf War (Mossman, 2017). The emphasis that the broadcaster placed on entertainment in the face of conflict, loss of life and human suffering is mirrored in *Ghostwatch*, where this same focus on entertainment value leads to disastrous effects for the Early family. When the *Ghostwatch* team reveals 'live on air' that Suzanne Early is creating some of the phenomena, it holds the power to shock and enrage, diverting attention away from the family's peril and prompting Parkinson to dismiss the events as a hoax. This shift highlights the conflict between sensationalism and genuine concern for those involved.

After this revelation Suzanne tearfully protests that they were giving the viewers "what they wanted". The production crew assembled at Foxhill Drive, as well as the presenters in the studio, fail to grasp that the directive to fake an event came from Pipes himself. Enraged by Parkinson's suggestion that the programme will have to end, Pipes escalates his own, far more sinister process of discursive revelation, which the viewer begins to realise he has been engaged in since the beginning of the broadcast. Pipes increases his violence against the family, the film crew and Greene, using the apparatus of the BBC against it until his existence can no longer be denied. This act underscores the vulnerability of media itself, demonstrating how it can be co-opted to serve a personal agenda. If *Ghostwatch* is to be considered as a response to BBC coverage of the Gulf War, then Pipes's actions serves as a scathing critique of media influence. They expose how metanarratives about war are legitimised through the choices made by individuals with privileged access to information, resulting in selective disclosure to the public. In relation to the work of John Simpson, a BBC journalist who covered the war, David Willcox commented that:

> A significant consideration for his continued reporting of the conflict concerned his desire to write a book about events. Simpson's revelation illuminates the existence of external motives for journalists covering a conflict. These motives introduce a number of questions about the role of the war reporter. Having been based in Iraq during the Gulf War, he may have felt the need to explain events after conflict when the direct influence of enemy censorship was removed. (Wilcox, 2005, p. 30)

This tension between the known and unknown propels *Ghostwatch* forward. The audience begins to question the presented information and the true locus of power. Pipes becomes even more terrifying by the end of the broadcast, when he becomes the director of a mass séance conducted through the nation's television sets. As Volk intended, this conclusion serves as a damning statement against uncritical relationships with media and the lack of awareness that he believed the public held regarding the private agendas of institutions.

The representation of Pipes remains chilling even after thirty-two years. His history is unveiled during the programme by his former probation officer, who contacts the show through the 'live phone-in' system. In life, he had been Raymond Tunstall, a mentally disturbed man who molested several children before being committed to a psychiatric unit. After his release he lived in Foxhill Drive, subletting a room from his aunt and uncle. This revelation undermines the expertise of Dr Pascoe, who claims to have record of the site of the Early house dating back to pre-history. However, since Pipes was subletting the room, he does not appear in any official records, underlining his marginality in society and the gaps in official state narratives. Pipes's former probation officer asserts that Tunstall was extremely unwell and "should never have been released", a fact made evident in the broadcast through his frequent attacks and attempts to assault Suzanne, the eldest Early daughter. Pipes, whom the audience never truly 'sees' but rather glimpses reflected in glass or the drawings of Kim, the younger Early daughter, had most of his face eaten off by his pet cats, which he locked in the cupboard under the stairs with him when he committed suicide. The sound of cats and the cupboard under the stairs are central to Pipes's manifestations. The probation officer also reveals that Tunstall believed that he was possessed by the ghost of Mother Seddons, a notorious Victorian baby farmer, charged with murdering the children in her care. Pipes's story is an unabashedly grim tale and while there is little sympathy afforded to him, there is an attempt to contextualise his life and death within the parameters of a healthcare system that failed to protect both him and his potential victims. Inherent in Pipes's narrative is the tacit implication that he is a victim of Thatcherite social care policies,[3] which led to the closure of mental health institutions and the release of individuals like Tunstall. This was part of a reform effort to transition to 'care in the community;' but adequate care never materialised. He is undoubtedly a criminal, but he is also a product of the institutions that allowed his criminality to go unchecked.

Pipes stands apart from the ghosts of *A Christmas Carol* and Anne Boleyn's ghost in *Spencer*. His presence brings no comfort, yet his encounters with the Early family, the

[3] Margaret Thatcher served as Prime Minister of the Conservative Party Government 1979–1990.

Ghostwatch team and viewers are no less efficacious as a staging ground for social change. Like Mother Seddons, whom he believed haunted him, Tunstall operated on the fringes of society, committing crimes against a backdrop of entrenched class divisions and economic instability. Want, as depicted in *A Christmas Carol*, is here transformed into Raymond Tunstall, a mentally disturbed individual lacking access to professional help due to social and economic policies. This ghostly encounter represents the worst of society's failures returning to trouble the institutions of the present. Pipes serves as the focal point for critiquing the Thatcherite metanarrative of progress, and it is Pipes's manipulation of time that imbues *Ghostwatch* with its critical potency.

In both *A Christmas Carol* and *Spencer*, linear time is disrupted through supernatural encounters, only to be restored by the conclusion. Scrooge and Diana experience time linearly until their supernatural encounters, after which the linear progression of time is invariably restored. *Ghostwatch* contests the very idea of time as linear, by disrupting the viewers' implicit trust in the concept. This is exemplified in one of the programme's most harrowing scenes. After a spate of horrific attacks by Pipes, which culminates in Suzanne's possession, the 'live' studio link to the house is lost. When it is re-established, Suzanne and Kim, are seen calmly playing a board game with Sarah Greene, while Michael Parkinson and Dr Pascoe watch the feed with confusion. Dr Pascoe realises that "This picture we're seeing now isn't live". What Parkinson and Pascoe have been watching was filmed earlier and the real-time scenes in the house—those from the 'present' time—are lost to them. Pipes has gained control of the apparatus and with it control of time.

The programme acknowledges the relationship between the apparatus and time from the outset. The live broadcast, the viewer is assured, is the best way to find the truth. Greene highlights the infrared camera's ability to reveal everything. In this sense the live broadcast is presented initially as existing outside time, beyond the personal and political biases that have been constructed prior to the cameras rolling. However, *Ghostwatch* constantly challenges the notion of the camera as an objective, omniscient presence, particularly through its manipulation of the viewers with 'archive' footage. The first glimpse of Foxhill Drive is 'archive' footage, shot by Dr Pascoe and her team, of Suzanne and Kim's bedroom at night. The sleeping girls are awoken by banging and objects flying around the room. As they scream, Pipes begins to grab Suzanne as Mrs Early rushes in and drags the girls out of the room. During the 'live phone-ins,' a viewer reports seeing a man standing by the bedroom window during the incident. The video clip is played again and there is now a dark figure visible in the shot. However, when it is played for a third time the figure is no longer visible and Pascoe and Parkinson dismiss the

sighting. Pascoe states that she has seen the footage many times and never noticed this, before using an electronic pen to highlight the area in front of the curtains to explain how the viewer may have been confused, mistaking how the shadow cast by the curtains could have seemed like a figure. Despite this explanation, calls continue to come in from viewers who claim to have seen a similar figure. The objectivity of the camera, placed in the children's bedroom for research, is called into question. Has the audience truly seen something, or have they all been mistaken? The archive 'footage' casts doubt over the opinions of the experts and disrupts the fixity of the past.

As Manning expressed in her interview with Mossman (2017) "we had broken the contract between Auntie [i.e. the BBC] and the public". *Ghostwatch* undermined the implicit notion that the BBC, as a public institution was unbiased and trustworthy. The programme drew on the apparatus of the institution, including famous and 'trustworthy' personalities such as Michael Parkinson and Sarah Greene, as well as innovative technologies typically reserved for the transmission of factual information, such as infrared, phone-ins and *vox pop*s. The contract was undeniably broken and the power of the institution to influence the public was critiqued. More significantly, *Ghostwatch* dismantled linear time to the extent that the viewer cannot confidently conceive of its restoration by the narrative's conclusion. In the final moments of the broadcast, Pipes has gained total control of the studio and as a figure of the past, has returned to play with time, segmenting it, presenting it, and reconfiguring it as he sees fit. Pipes dismantles the process of legitimation constructed by the production team. He uses the apparatus of truth against them, to expose a history of trauma, pain, terror, and negligence within state institutions. Pipes's control of the BBC and infiltration of the systems of truth and information demonstrates the inevitability of the past invading the present and the future. It affirms that Pipes is part of a long history of "multiple and recurrent" (Derrida, 1994, p. 92) abuse, which has been occluded within the hegemonic metanarrative of late twentieth-century Britain. While Pipes bears sole responsibility for his violence against children, he is also a product of neoliberal, classist Thatcherite policies that allowed his criminality and violence to go unchecked. *Ghostwatch* reveals how these policies led to his release into a community that is still critically threatened by his ability to harm. To read Pipes as an avenging figure of the working class, akin to Anne Boleyn in *Spencer* as the avenger of commodified women, would be reductive. Pipes is as much of a threat to the working-class community he came from as he is a part of it. *Ghostwatch* instead prompts the viewer to read Pipes as the ghost of ignored histories and failed promises of neoliberal hegemony that Fukuyama exalts. Pipes is an abuser of children, who after his death exists outside of the law and beyond time, he can no longer be

contained by the institutions of power. Derrida (1994, p. 221), urges scholars to heed such ghosts as it is their role to "learn […] from the ghost" and to listen to it if they "love justice". Pipes has been marginalised, both as Raymond Tunstall, and now as a spectral entity and embodies this neglect. Driven by a desire for twisted justice, he calls attention to the legacy of institutional failures. *Ghostwatch* is emphatic, the ghost cannot, and must not, be ignored. In an address at the 1975 Conservative Party conference, Margaret Thatcher (1925–2013) claimed that "The spirit of envy can destroy. It can never build". *Ghostwatch* proves Thatcher's assertion to be false. Raymond Tunstall, a man banished to the margins of Thatcherite Britain returns as Pipes in an attack on time itself, destroying the metanarrative of progress and rebuilding the world in his own violent image.

Conclusion

The word ghost is derived from the Old English word 'gast', meaning:

> the animating or vital principle in humans and animals; that which gives life to the body, in contrast to its purely material being; the life force, the breath of life (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2023).

In this context, there is nothing that suggests terror. Rather, it indicates ubiquity, a shared trait common to all living creatures. In its modern context, the word seems equally fascinated with this shared trait, but its fascination focuses on its absence. The horror of the ghost is that it shows absence where there should be presence (life force) and presence where there should be absence (the supernatural manifestation of the dead). This disruptive staging of presence and absence is also the locus of the ghost's power. The ghost's animation, despite the absence of life force, denotes a source of power outside of our understanding or control. Moreover, their presence in our linear configuration of time reveals the fallibility of linear time.

The ghosts in the texts discussed vary in how much they are facilitated to access this power and to the degree they are enabled to enact social change. The ghosts of *A Christmas Carol* repair time and with it uphold the social order of Victorian Britain, enshrining the importance of capitalist values by ensuring Scrooge will empower the (now upwardly mobile) Cratchit family. The ghost of Anne Boleyn in *Spencer* has the potential to radically alter the future of the British monarchy and indeed, British society, by recasting their treatment of women as a history of abuse. However, her power can only be exerted as far as Diana is willing to see herself as part of a wider narrative of female subjugation. Diana's choice to seek personal freedom is a private victory, which sidelines those who help her to achieve it. Anne's escape from linear time allows Diana to escape the timeline of power transference which she was part

of, but this system will continue without her. The Early family, the mock BBC team and by extension the British public's encounter with *Ghostwatch*'s Pipes, proves the most radical of any of the ghostly encounters discussed. Pipes succeeds in infiltrating the systems of narrative production and uses them to reorder time. Diegetically, the world he creates is one of horror and violence; extradiegetically, his actions reveal the horror and violence which the institutions of the British government and the BBC had attempted to elide.

Derrida (1991, p. 117) describes his enduring faith in Marxism as stemming not from doctrine or dogma, but from what he believes Marxism represents, which is "to produce events, new effective forms of action, practice, organisation". The ghosts considered here might be regarded in the same light. They enter the diegesis with the potential to produce events outside of the expected social norms, events that hold inherent radical potential because they exist beyond those norms. Despite their differences and the failure of the ghosts in *A Christmas Carol* and *Spencer* to truly destabilise the dominant narrative, each of these texts share a determined belief in the commonality implied by the word 'gast'. The ghosts of *A Christmas Carol*, *Spencer* and *Ghostwatch* are part of the human experience that Derrida might count among "the innumerable sites of suffering". They are variously subjugated, ignored, vilified, victimised and exalted, but the attention that they demand within the diegesis draws focus not only to the suffering they highlight but that of humanity as a whole. This shared experience serves as a source of empowerment to effect change, take action and dismantle the barriers between generations present, past and yet to come.

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