

## ***Most Haunted* and the Convergence of Traditional Belief and Popular Television**

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### ***Abstract***

LivingTV's flagship series, *Most Haunted*, has been haunting the satellite network since 2002. The set-up of the series is straightforward: a team of investigators, including a historian, a parapsychologist, and "spiritualist medium" Derek Acorah, "legend-trip," spending the night at some location within the United Kingdom that is reputed to be haunted, with the hopes of catching on video concrete proof of the existence of ghosts. However, unlike other reality television or true-life supernatural television shows, *Most Haunted* includes and addresses the audience less as a spectator and more as an active participant in the ghost hunt. Watching *Most Haunted*, we are directed not so much to accept or reject the evidence provided, as to engage in the debate over the evidence's veracity. Like legend-telling in its oral form, belief in or rejection of the truth-claims of the story are less central than the possibility of the narrative's truth—a position that invites debates about those truth-claims. This paper argues that *Most Haunted*, in its premise and structure, not only depicts or represents legend texts (here ghost stories), but engages the audience in the debates about the status of its truth-claims, thereby bringing this mass-mediated popular culture text closer to the folkloristic, legend-telling dynamic than other similar shows.

### ***Introduction***

This paper concerns the convergence of folklore and popular media. I am interested in seeing the points of convergence in marrying folkloristic approaches, in this case supernatural belief traditions, with an exceptionally popular reality television show, *Most Haunted* (LivingTV, 2002–present). This approach is not simply to look for evidence of traditional supernatural belief *in* a television show; such motif-spotting, while useful in folklore research, does little to illuminate how folklore and popular media converge in the early part of the twenty-first century. Convergence is understood to be the coming together of two different cultural phenomena; in this case, folkloric supernatural belief traditions and popular television shows. While both the folklore of (and about) ghosts and television are independent studies, each with its own academic traditions, my interest lies in seeing the discourse that emerges when those two studies converge. In order to study this convergence, I am employing an ostensive methodology, looking at how a television series like *Most Haunted* can be considered a form of ostension, as legend scholars understand the term. The televisual text functions like a traditional legend-teller, creating a complex, matrix-like relationship among the supernatural belief traditions, the television show, and those watching that show. Linda Dégh likewise recognised—albeit in passing—the role that television

programmes about the supernatural play as legend-tellers (Dégh 2001, 325). It is this role that I hope to flesh out more below.

### *Ostension*

The term *ostension*, at least within folkloristics, refers to the presentation (as opposed to the representation) of a legend text (Dégh 1995, 237); instead of a legendary narrative being *told* (that is, represented through storytelling), it is *shown* as direct action (that is, presented). The term originates from the Latin *ostendere*, meaning “to show,” but its current academic usage can be traced back to Saint Augustine, who, in his *De Magistro* uses the term for the teaching of language through a direct appeal to the thing to which a word refers. Umberto Eco, in distinguishing between “primitive” and “dictionary” words (that is, words that refer to something concrete versus words that only refer to other words), noted that understanding “primitive” words occurred through ostensive action: the experience of the direct relationship between the signifier (word) and the signified (thing) (Eco 1984, 50; see also Eco 1976, 224–6; Dégh and Vázsonyi 1983, 5–7). [1] Dégh and Vázsonyi borrowed this idea from Eco and used ostension to examine “legend-related Hallowe’en atrocities and additionally explore[d] a number of contemporary cases of criminal ostension” (Dégh 2001, 427). Dégh and Vázsonyi’s focus was primarily on various forms of “copy-cat” crime; murderers who used previous stories about murderers (often drawing on popular-culture accounts) as templates for emulation and improvement on their “killing records” (Dégh 2001, 434–40). Parallel to Dégh and Vázsonyi, Sylvia Grider was also looking at how Hallowe’en legends become ostensive (cited in Ellis 1990, 32). As Bill Ellis noted, “traditional narratives exist not simply as verbal texts to be collected, transcribed and archived. They are also maps for action . . .” (1989, 218).

Despite being largely responsible for introducing ostension into the folklorist’s vocabulary, Dégh recognised that Ellis had developed the study of folkloristic ostension further (Dégh 2001, 458). Ellis divided the idea of legend-ostension into separate categories of action. For example, “quasi-ostension” “is the observer’s interpretation of puzzling evidence in terms of narrative tradition” (Ellis 1989, 208). In many respects, as Ellis pointed out, this echoes what David Hufford terms “the cultural source hypothesis,” wherein “only a person who believes in a concept will actually experience it” (Ellis 1989, 208). Applying quasi-ostension within the supernatural traditions explored here, only someone who *a priori* believes in ghosts will encounter one; the argument further suggests that the encounter only occurred because of the individual’s belief that it would. Ellis differentiates quasi-ostension from “pseudo-ostension,” which he defines as “imitating the outlines of a known narrative to perpetuate a hoax” (Ellis 1989, 208). [2] If quasi-ostension suggests that no paranormal phenomena are possible and are therefore only perceived as such because of an existing belief tradition, pseudo-ostension plays upon those existing beliefs in order to dupe the believer, as in the many cases of fraudulent psychic mediums. Both quasi-ostension and pseudo-ostension, Ellis distinguishes from “ostension itself” (Ellis 1989, 209). This is where individuals, after hearing certain stories, decide to engage in legend-like activities themselves, ranging from trying to re-enact Satanic rituals and poisoning Hallowe’en candy to *avoiding* areas thought to be places of Satanic ritual, or having Hallowe’en candy inspected for

fear of tampering. Most significantly in this discussion, Ellis recognises that all three of these forms of ostension are *not* mutually exclusive and often feed on each other synergistically (Ellis 1989, 209). Thus a case of quasi-ostension may lead to another case of pseudo-ostension, or an ostensive action could spark quasi-ostensive panics.

My own contribution to the ostension discussion was in coining a separate category, “cinematic ostension.” In “*Candyman* Can: Film and Ostension” (Koven 1999), I argued that any legend text dramatised through popular culture (specifically films) is also a kind of ostension, particularly when we are *shown* the narrative through actions, rather than having the story retold to us in narration (see also Koven 2002). Cinematic ostension implicitly recognises an audience by encouraging some form of post-presentation debate regarding the veracity of the legends presented. There is also an implicit recognition of the fictive form of this narration (a fiction film), but equally a recognition that the stories upon which certain films are based come from “genuine urban legends.” Whether the stories of hook-handed killers or ghosts in the mirror (as they appear in Bernard Rose’s 1992 film *Candyman*) are believed or not, such veracity is secondary to the discussion of their *possibility*; which I would argue is an essential aspect of the legend in general. I would further propose a “legend-matrix,” which, while still positioning belief and disbelief on one axis, would also recognise such debates as mediated through a specific (in this case, cinematic) text. The problem with the term “cinematic ostension” is that it semantically excludes television (or other forms of popular culture). Perhaps “mass-mediated ostension” would be a more appropriate and less restrictive term, thereby incorporating all forms of mass media. Mass-mediated ostension recognises that *presented* legend materials, whether dramatised or “documentary,” is the medium through which extra-textual debates surrounding the legend’s veracity occur. These debates may also be textual (such as debating the veracity of the phenomena within a show itself), but such textual debates about veracity are not essential to a mass-mediated ostensive legend-matrix.

Of course, audiences for a show like *Most Haunted* need to be properly studied; so any generalisation or hypothesis I can make about their actual behaviour is pure speculation. But sometimes such speculations are important to make provisionally before further research is conducted. What we do know, apart from the significant viewing figures for the show, and the tremendous demand for tickets for the *Most Haunted Live* broadcasts, is more anecdotal, but does point towards some further areas of exploration. Richard Woolfe, the director of television programming at LivingTV, noted the following:

We’ve since found out that loads of fans [of *Most Haunted*] have rituals attached to the way they watch the show; they turn off the lights, close the curtains, some burn candles and others set tape recorders running in case there’s any EVP [Electronic Voice Phenomenon—ostensive action to be sure]. We also discovered that lots of people are getting together to watch the shows, even holding *Most Haunted* parties (quoted in Fielding, Acorah and Paul 2005, 14).

While there is no concrete proof that the veracity of the presented phenomena is actually discussed during these get-togethers, I can confirm, from my own viewing experiences, that watching this show with other people elicits comments on the show’s veracity more than does the joint viewing of any other television

programmes I have watched. Most of these comments involve outright scepticism of Derek Acorah's abilities as a medium, particularly his alleged spirit-possessions.

*Most Haunted*, in addition to being *about* the folklore of the supernatural and the ostensive presentation of such phenomena, is in itself a kind of televised "legend-trip." Legend-trips involve, as is semantically obvious, travelling to a specific location attached to a legend in the hopes of witnessing some kind of phenomena *as if in the legend itself*. Such journeys clearly mark themselves as, in Ellis's phrase, "ostension itself." Carl Lindahl noted recently:

Such legend quests constitute a sort of *ostensive play*, an improvised drama in which the players, visiting the site of a haunting or the scene of a crime, ... both recreate the storied events and simultaneously expand the tale by adding their experiences to the core narrative (Lindahl 2005, 165).

There are at least two issues related to legend-tripping that are relevant here. On the one hand, each new legend-trip adds—through ostension—to the narrative core attached to the location, by engaging and replicating the legend itself. Much like graffiti, a truly terrifying encounter at a legend-site ensures a kind of legendary immortality to the trippers.

The other issue is more implicit. By engaging in ostensive play, particularly around a historic site, legend-trippers are also exploring their local history through re-enactment. Although legend-tripping tends to be an adolescent activity, and any pedagogical significance to such activities would likely be met with scorn, Linda Dégh did note the following:

It is remarkable that the young are so curious about the past, and the houses and other sites [for legend-tripping] that do not exist anymore. They go on fearsome expeditions to check-points—broken-down railroad bridges, grave markers, chapels, tunnels. On their daring trips to the unknown spirit underground, they challenge the dead to appear and tell how they perished (Dégh 2001, 327).

While certainly the prime directive of legend-tripping is to have a "scary experience," such experiences also bring their own local history to life, whether in the form of communication with the spirit world (in a kind of "unliving" history) or through a concrete and tactile experience of the space. Michel de Certeau recognised that:

Legends about places humanize physical spaces and lay claim to territory regardless of legal ownership or official nomenclature. They alter the identity of a place and make it habitable, associating with it a history linking past with present and rejecting scientific knowledge and political authority (Motz 1998, 342; see also de Certeau 1984, 105–26).

In many respects, the investigations by the *Most Haunted* team do exactly that; assuming a belief in the supernatural, the team's encounter with the location's ghosts reveals a vernacular history of experience pertaining to that locale. Or, assuming a mantle of scepticism, particularly through the use of night-vision cameras, the team experiences historical properties without the aid of electric lights, thereby recreating an experiential analogy of living conditions of the past.

Returning to Bill Ellis's work on the legend-trip, clearly the primary intention of such undertakings is to have a fright, either through what Dégh has called the

“general scary condition” (quoted in Hall 1973, 172) of the location itself or through actual contact with spirits. However, as Ellis has noted, there is a significant ambivalence in the experience:

[The legend-trip] thus plays with an ambiguous response, neither skepticism nor terror, but one similar to what Goffman [in *Frame Analysis*] has termed “being engrossed.” Crucial to such a response, he argues, “is not an individual’s sense of what is real, but rather what it is he can get caught up in, engrossed in, carried away by; and this can be something he can claim is really going on and yet claim is not real” (Ellis 1981, 495).

This ambivalence (rather than “ambiguity,” which Ellis uses) towards the legend-trip (as ostension) recognises the ambivalence of the legend genre itself, which encourages neither belief nor disbelief, as essentialist categories, but a metatextual debate about whether or not such events are *possible*. During a legend-trip, while the supernatural experience may feel “real,” the immediate supernatural explanation for the experience may not hold water. As I demonstrate below, each episode of *Most Haunted* is structured like a classic legend-trip, including a build-up of tension and anxiety through the telling of spooky stories attached to the location, the evocation of the spirits themselves, and finally a discussion about the experience from the safe distance of the next morning (Ellis 1981, 487).

### “Reality TV” and the Supernatural

*Most Haunted* debuted in 2002 on LivingTV, a British-based satellite and cable channel. While LivingTV is known in the United Kingdom for broadcasting a number of high-profile American television shows, it has also developed a reputation for showing a number of paranormal and supernatural reality series from around the world, including *Most Haunted*. *Most Haunted* has been surprisingly successful, with viewing figures in the millions. According to the production team, each new episode has approximately one million viewers, whereas their live broadcasts, *Most Haunted Live*, are known to bring in viewing figures in excess of five million (Fielding, Acorah and Paul 2005, 16). [3]

*Most Haunted* falls within the category of “reality TV” (see Hill 2005). More specifically, it belongs to a subgenre of “supernatural reality TV,” wherein a team of investigators travels around the United Kingdom to investigate sites of purported supernatural occurrences. [4] The *Most Haunted* team is led by former children’s television presenter Yvette Fielding and is supported by a number of experts, including a historian (Richard Felix), a parapsychologist, and at least one psychic medium. These four investigators fulfil very specific roles in the investigation: the medium’s presence is to facilitate contact with any spirits or ghosts at the location; Felix, as the show’s resident historian, is present to verify any historical information generated by the medium; and the parapsychologist is present to ensure as “scientific” an investigation into the purported haunted site as possible and to attempt to debunk any immediate claims that the phenomena experienced are paranormal. Fielding’s role, as leader of the investigation, is metaphorically mediumistic: while the team’s *psychic* medium is present to act as a channel between our material world and the world of spirits, Fielding, as the show’s host, is the medium between the on-screen investigation and the television audience’s experience of that investigation. She is present, and presented, as our

guide to the specific investigation. However, and what for me makes *Most Haunted* unique in this subgenre, is the on-screen presence of the entire technical crew during these investigations. The make-up artist, lighting rigger, cinematographer, sound engineer, and producer, all take part in the investigation, and there is no attempt to hide their presence. This inclusion of the crew was consciously part of the show's design. "Right from the start, Karl [Beattie, the show's producer] wanted to produce a show that was a serious investigation, and he wanted it to be about a group of people rather than one or two 'stars'" (Fielding, Acorah and Paul 2005, 2).

*Most Haunted* is a different kind of supernatural reality TV show to the majority of the subgenre. While it is supernatural reality TV, there is no financial reward for surviving the night in the haunted house; nor are the on-screen presenters "contestants" in some kind of competition, as in the "reality gameshows" (Hill 2005, 31–6). [5] Nor is the focus of the series on the lives and everyday experiences of the investigators themselves. [6] Despite not being a docu-soap (Hill 2005, 27), frequent watching of *Most Haunted* does permit a sense of "getting to know" the crew of the show and develops a sense of continuity between investigations. For example, Stuart Torvell, the series lighting rigger, tends to get the brunt of most poltergeist attacks, which creates some empathy for Torvell and an almost comic anticipation of what the spirit world will literally throw in his direction this week. And while *Most Haunted* is "investigative," unlike the "tabloid TV" shows (Hill 2005, 24–7), [7] in each episode a separate investigation is *shown* (presented), not *described* after the fact (represented).

*Most Haunted* is thus unique in this subgenre of reality TV in revealing the investigative processes of the series. By avoiding the conventions of continuity television, whereby the means of graphic construction are supposedly hidden from the viewer, *Most Haunted* privileges this construction as part of the series. When paranormal phenomena are encountered during an investigation, we are aware of who was present during the encounter because of this disruption of classical codes of continuity. There is no question of who is holding the camera, as the entire crew present is seen on-screen. In the related Canadian series, *The Girly Ghosthunters* (Space 2004), where a team of four young Canadian women investigate supernatural locations throughout Ontario, the camera and sound operators are ignored; and, for example, when some anomalous noise is encountered, the "girls" ask each other if they are the source of that sound. In *Girly Ghosthunters*, the possibility of another member of the crew accidentally (or even deliberately) being the source for seemingly anomalous noises is never addressed, because the series' crew is never recognised as being present. This may seem a minor quibble, but the failure to recognise that *someone* is holding the camera and following the girls around undermines the series' claims regarding the veracity of the investigation. *Most Haunted*, however, by recognising everyone who is present when phenomena are experienced, supports the investigative truth-claims the show is attempting to demonstrate, namely the existence of the supernatural.

### ***Most Haunted***

*Most Haunted*, as an investigation into the supernatural, requires a strict mandate under which to operate. Put succinctly, what footage the team captures on the

night of the investigation is what will be broadcast on the show. The entire show is predicated upon an assurance to the audience that there will be no fakery involved. If the team is not able to capture any paranormal events while on location, then when that episode is broadcast, no paranormal event will be shown. Even before the show was commissioned by LivingTV, the “no fakery” rule was in place:

Straight away there was interest [in producing the show], but [Beattie and Fielding] were taken aback by the broadcasters who wanted them to fake some of the activity. “What if nothing happens?” commissioning editors asked. “It’s going to be a very boring show.” One major broadcaster was ready to sign it up if they would fake a few special effects, then come clean at the end of the show—as Derren Brown was later to do in a one-off special for Channel 4. But Karl and Yvette stood their ground, insisting that even if nothing happened on the night, it would still be interesting to watch the team dealing with their emotions and the “scare factor”. The shows where there was no discernable activity would give them a chance to explain to viewers how a paranormal investigation works and what phenomena have to be discounted. Their goal, right from the start, was to conduct a balanced investigation into paranormal activity to try to find out once and for all whether ghosts do exist—and, if they do, what they are (Fielding, Acorah and Paul 2005, 4).

Detractors of *Most Haunted*, when not discounting the possibility of the existence of ghosts outright, often criticise the show for being the dulllest programme on the air; each investigation begins with much anticipation for the evening, but often little is actually delivered in the form of observable paranormal phenomena. Yet that response misses what the show’s producers intended, which was a reality TV series about the processes of paranormal investigation, including their banality.

Mandates, however, are meant to be, if not broken, then perhaps bent a little. *Most Haunted* has received more than its fair share of criticism regarding the veracity of its truth-claims, including several complaints lodged with the media watchdog Ofcom. I deal with the Ofcom investigation below, but this controversy needs to be noted in passing first. Most of the criticisms of the show are focused primarily on the show’s main psychic medium, Derek Acorah, whose role I discuss in more detail in the course of this paper, including the controversies surrounding his alleged mediumship. It should be noted here, however, that the entire show is affected by these criticisms of Acorah. Such criticisms may challenge the veracity of a single aspect of the show’s “truth-claims,” but this does not actually challenge the more presentational evidence in the investigations. Of course, by watching *Most Haunted* we are invited to question the veracity of *any* of the evidence presented, including that of the show’s psychics. Such is the very nature of legend storytelling. However, as ostension, we need to distinguish between representational and presentational evidence; that is, the evidence produced by Acorah, or any of the psychic mediums, is representational, and we have only their word to go by. *Most Haunted* at its most compelling also occasionally offers more presentational evidence, when the show enters the realm of the ostensive.

Each episode of *Most Haunted* follows a standard format; and, as I noted previously, these episodes largely follow the structure of an adolescent legend-trip. Although discussing the “mock-ordeal” at American summer camps, Bill Ellis’s description in comparison with legend-tripping seems to anticipate *Most Haunted*: “Like the legend-trip, they begin with accounts of past happenings, journey into uncanny territory,

contact with the supernatural, and conclude with intense discussion" (Ellis 1981, 489). Each episode begins with a twenty-four-second "teaser" opening. This "teaser" features a voiceover from Yvette Fielding and gives a brief précis of the *kinds* of experiences the episode will feature: that is, poltergeist activity, orbs and raps. The images are desaturated into monochrome, and decontextualised through the editing into a montage of close-ups of the team's faces as they scream and generally look terrified. This "teaser" flows into the standard opening credit sequence, with spooky electronic theme music and similarly edited images. However, this montage is drawn from all previous series of the show, including the current one (the entire series is shot, edited, and packaged mostly before the episodes are broadcast).

The individual episode begins properly with Fielding introducing the location and giving a potted history of the site. This section of each show runs for approximately five to six minutes, and includes very standard documentary-style talking-heads footage mixed with wider establishing shots of Fielding walking through the space, thereby demonstrating the physical context of the location. Often, the show's historian, Richard Felix, is presented in the role of storyteller, giving the grisly details of the events that are supposed to have occurred at this location (often, these stories, if not actual legends, are certainly presented as legend-like). In addition—and this is particularly relevant for folklorists watching the series—memorates are told by those who have themselves encountered supernatural phenomena at that location. While it is certainly possible that such memorates are examples of proto-ostension (the telling of legends as personal experience narratives; see Ellis 2003, 163), there is no reason to doubt the veracity of the storytellers in the show. Interspersed within this section of each episode, however, are tiny reconstructions of paranormal phenomena, often filmed in monochrome (in order to distinguish these reconstructions from the full-colour videography of Fielding wandering the premises telling the stories attached to the place). These reconstructions also feature eerie music and sound effects and sped-up action, not only to highlight the reconstructedness of the sequence, but also to further mystify the location.

For example, during this introductory sequence in the series-two opener, "Brannigan's Nightclub, Manchester" (originally broadcast 8 April 2003), Fielding is recounting how staff and patrons at Brannigan's will feel "an unseen presence" while descending the stairs towards the basement. To demonstrate (*present*, by any other word), visually, something "unseen" requires a dense videographic construction. To deconstruct how such an effect is produced, a detailed shot-by-shot analysis is required. While Fielding is relating this part of the story, additional lighting for the show has been added, casting bright green and red light on the walls, giving an added eeriness to this documentary footage, while also underlining its artificiality. At one point while descending these stairs, Fielding breaks off her narration for an inserted "reconstructed" shot: filmed as a monochrome re-negativised image (giving the illusion that the image is a negative, and perhaps reflecting the negative connotations of this violent spirit), and with the action highly sped-up, a young man descends the stairs, moves toward the camera, and then disappears. But just before the image disappears and we return to Fielding's narration, the "presence" shakes its head very rapidly with a rattling noise on the soundtrack. We return to Fielding who notes that some people descending these stairs are actually pushed by persons unknown

or unseen. This is immediately followed by more reconstructed footage: the empty stairwell (with red and green lights still visible), the ghostly figure (still in monochrome and negative) halfway down the stairs making a pushing movement with his hand and then jump-cutting further down the stairs to do another sped-up head-shake, a slow-motion shot of a man descending the stairs (we know this second man is “human” because the colour has returned and the image is no longer in negative), a quick cut-back to the negative spirit pushing out with both hands, and then a return to the “human” looking around to see who pushed him as he continues down the stairs. There are two more insert shots of the negative spirit still present doing his sped-up head-shake. Visually, at no point do these two figures occupy the screen at the same time (they may in fact be played by the same person), but the effect is one of causality—that the “negative spirit” pushed the other man. This lengthy description of this sequence does not do it justice: not that this is a brilliant example of television artistry, but this entire sequence on the steps, including Fielding’s narration, runs for only twenty-four seconds. The artificial lighting, the use of re-negativised monochrome, and the slowed down and sped-up action are all technical tricks that underline the artificiality of this section of the episode. This entire section is much in keeping with the kind of “Tabloid TV” style of other supernatural reality TV shows like *Scariest Places*; we are told spooky stories—sometimes as memorates, sometimes as legend—and offered visual reconstructions that give a “horror movie” quality to the location.

In many respects, beyond following in the tradition of “Tabloid TV” shows, this introductory section of each *Most Haunted* episode functions to key the television audience to interpret the forthcoming phenomena within the context of the narratives just related. If we see each episode as a televised legend-trip, this section conforms to what Gary Hall noted regarding the telling of scary stories prior to such adolescent adventures:

As important as form is in legend-telling, the “legend atmosphere” or “general scary condition” is just as crucial to the effectiveness of this type of narrative. More specifically, the “scariness” of the legend-trip is a result of: 1. the foreboding appearance of the legend site, 2. legend-telling, and 3. the atmosphere of tension and uncertainty generated by the trip. During the legend-trip, in fact, the young people cultivate an atmosphere of fear; they try to frighten one another; they seek out contact with the supernatural and attendant dangers (Hall 1973, 170).

The highly artificial legend and memorate section of each *Most Haunted* episode is more than just contrived television. It creates this “general scary condition” in the location prior to the investigation proper. In terms of quasi-ostension, by beginning the investigation in the tradition associated with the location being investigated, any phenomena, natural or supernatural, encountered during the night will be interpreted from the perspective of that legend tradition. This section of the episode, then, primes the belief pump, as it were.

The first part of an episode’s investigation begins with a psychic walkabout: the show’s psychic or psychics are filmed touring the site, in normal videographic style, and picking up on any residual or grounded spirit-information. These sequences tend to run for approximately fifteen minutes and so make up a considerable amount of on-screen time. The psychics’ role on the show is highly liminal; they are, after all, the literal “medium” through which the initial contact with the spirit world is made. In terms of the ostension arguments, the

mediums are additionally liminal, in that their role is both presentational and representational. While in the introductory “legend-memorate” section of an episode all the information presented is representational (that is, told *to us*), the psychic walkabouts are both representational, in that we are *told* what information they are receiving, and presentational, as we *see* them receiving this information from the spirits. When the psychic mediums receive concrete names and historical information about the spirits or about the location, on-screen displays confirm (or occasionally note as inconclusive) the evidence the medium has offered. For example, again from the “Brannigan’s Nightclub” episode, Acorah “sees” piles of bodies in the church-part of what is now the nightclub (the location used to be a Methodist church). Acorah senses that these dead people died, not on the site itself, but were killed not too far away and brought to the present location. On screen, the following information is confirmed by the *Most Haunted* team in post-production: “Battle of Peterloo: On 16 August 1819 the townsfolk demonstrated over tax rises. 11 people were slaughtered by soldiers.” While we only have Acorah’s word that he picked up this information from the spirit-world (representation), we see him apparently in the process of picking up that information (presentation).

This presentation/representation duality of the psychic medium’s role is particularly acute with regard to possession. Out of all the psychic mediums the show has utilised over the various series (at the time of writing, series eight has just concluded and the team have conducted over one hundred investigations), only Derek Acorah seemed to get properly possessed by spirits. In the second episode of the first series, “Chillingham Castle” (originally broadcast 4 June 2002), during the psychic walkabout, Acorah picks up the impression of the body of a young boy believed to have been intentionally walled up inside a chimney (remains were found during renovations in the twentieth century). In the middle of his sentence describing what he claims are the boy’s feelings while being interred, his voice rises into a child-like wail and the pronouns of the account shift from the third person to the first person. This transformation is sufficiently odd that Fielding and parapsychologist Jason Karl are startled. Karl brings his electromagnetic field recorder towards Acorah to ascertain whether there are any changes in the medium’s electro-magnetic field readings (supposedly an indication of spirit presence).

Veracity in these sequences across all the *Most Haunted* episodes is predicated upon the belief in the medium himself: if we believe that Acorah is possessed, in this case by Chillingham’s legendary “Blue Boy” ghost, then such moments are presentational. If, however, we question Acorah’s abilities to either channel spirits or receive information from them, then such accounts are at best representational (and at worst clearly fraudulent if Acorah is faking). Other psychics tend to resist possession; notably David Wells, who, since series seven, has been the show’s primary psychic medium. Acorah seemed almost to welcome it. Spirit possession is where the purported spirit uses the medium’s voice-box and body to communicate to the other investigators. Again, we *see* the medium’s physical stance change and clearly hear changes in his voice. However, such “evidence” for spirit communication is still ultimately representational, as we only have hearsay that such possession is actually happening.

Acorah was the show's main psychic from its inception until series seven (in 2005), when he was given his own series on LivingTV, *Derek Acorah's Ghost Towns* (LivingTV, 2005–present). He left *Most Haunted* just before Hallowe'en in 2005, coinciding with the live broadcast of *Most Haunted Live* across four nights, beginning on 28 October and ending on Hallowe'en, which took place at various locations in London's East End on the trail of Jack the Ripper. On the first of these four nights, in an interview with the British newspaper *The Daily Mirror*, *Most Haunted's* current parapsychologist Ciarán O'Keefe intimated that Acorah was a fraud. In the *Mirror* piece, O'Keefe is quoted as intentionally suggesting misinformation to see whether Acorah would pick up on it:

While on a shoot at Bodmin gaol [O'Keefe] invented a long-dead South African jailer called Kreed Kafer—an anagram of Derek Faker.

"I wrote the name down and asked another member of the crew to mention it to Derek before filming."

"I honestly didn't think Derek would take the bait. But during the filming he actually got possessed by my fictional character!" (quoted in Roper 2005, no page).

O'Keefe conducted other similar tests of Acorah's veracity, all of which the famed psychic failed. O'Keefe still is the main parapsychologist on *Most Haunted* and Acorah had already been given his own show on LivingTV (which was not cancelled after the piece in *The Mirror* was printed). There appears to be a better working relationship between O'Keefe and the show's current primary psychic medium, David Wells. In terms of performance style, Wells is more subtle and fully admits, on the show, his own hesitation at definite conclusions from the spirit-world, especially when such information could be deduced from the existing surroundings. Also, as noted previously, Wells does not tend to allow himself to be possessed. In the wake of Acorah's flamboyant style (particularly when possessed), Wells' more subtle performance appears to encourage greater confidence in the medium's truth-claims. Nevertheless, whether with Wells or Acorah, the phenomenon of purported contact with the spirit-world through a psychic medium remains ostensibly liminal; that is, both presentational and representational.

After the psychic walkabouts, the crew split up into smaller groups, switch the cameras to "night-vision" (a way of filming in exceptionally low lighting conditions through an infra-red process, which gives *Most Haunted's* videographic style that distinctive eerie green glow), and attempt to document paranormal phenomena. These groups engage in a variety of activities intended to attract spirits, including vigils, where small groups sit quietly in a room and wait for something to happen; "calling out," where the small group calls out to the spirits in the room to come and "show themselves" with video cameras at the ready in "night-vision"; and more traditional séances and Ouija boards. In these smaller groups, the entire construction of the sequences is revealed. We know who is in the room at any time phenomena are recorded, as there is no hidden technical crew. Because of this, the crew of *Most Haunted* have become as "famous" as the core group of investigators. When demonstrable phenomena are captured on tape—either audibly in the case of raps and voices, or visually in the case of orbs, shadows, or flying spoons—the footage is often replayed several times to ensure that (a) often subtle phenomena are witnessed

by the audience, and (b) the conceit of the veracity of the investigation is supported by repeated demonstration of the paranormal phenomena.

Other kinds of evidence documented during this section of the programme include more inchoate phenomena, like “feelings” or impressions, such as discovering cold spots, or feeling sick or aggressive. Where the more material phenomena noted previously are presentational, changes in mood or personality, like possession, are only verifiable by “trust” in the presenters. We only have Fielding’s word that she is feeling sick or discovered a cold spot, or that producer Karl Beattie’s aggressiveness is “out of character.” Ciarán O’Keefe’s experience of cold or hot spots is more demonstrable and, therefore, more ostensive, as part of his technical equipment is a digital thermometer. Rather than just take his word that the thermometer has verified a cold spot, for example, one of the camera-operators will film the digital display registering the change in temperature.

To give a more concrete example of the kind of observable phenomena that can be considered ostensive, I shall consider two sequences from the second episode of the team’s investigation aboard “The Queen Mary” (originally broadcast 26 July 2005). The first sequence involves Jon Gilbert, the sound man for the show. While the team are moving to a new location aboard the ship, Gilbert stops as if he has seen something; the team question him and he describes a woman sitting on the edge of the swimming pool in a white bathing suit. Gilbert’s immediate response is more one of concern and less one of fear; that there is a woman wandering around where they are filming, at first not recalling that there has been no water in that pool for decades. The investigation team hurry over to the pool and the second sequence picks up as Derek Acorah confirms that, recently, a spirit-woman has come out of the swimming pool, and that he has had the impression of her shaking the water from her hair. Although the pool is dry, there is a very clear large wet patch right at its edge and footprints leading away. To rule out old stains, the camera lingers on this phenomenon sufficiently long to demonstrate that these “wet patches” are in fact drying and disappearing. Gilbert’s initial sighting of the bather is largely representational; we only have his word that he saw what he saw, although if his reaction was contrived his acting ability is impressive. The investigation of the wet patches is, however, presentational and ostensive; in addition to the footage of Acorah describing the spirit-woman emerging from the empty pool, the floor is clearly wet and the footprints are visible. Of course, despite the visual phenomena, it could be argued that this was a hoax: water was somehow splashed beside the empty pool and one of the crew members made the footprints herself. Such would be a totally plausible explanation; however, the *possibility* that the phenomenon was real, even if entertained momentarily, makes this incident legendary. And that this phenomenon is *presented* for us, makes the event ostensive.

Another kind of physical and ostensive presentation of supernatural phenomena on *Most Haunted* is the “trigger object test.” In such a test, an object is left in a room and filmed continuously with a stationary camera. The room is vacated and locked. The investigators return an hour or two later to see whether the object has moved. If so, the tape is reviewed carefully to see whether this movement was captured on film. Again, as with all the show’s evidence, one needs to trust that, between the room being secured and the team’s return, no one has tampered with the trigger objects, or with the

videotape in post-production. Stationary cameras are also sometimes used in séance sequences in order to document a larger contextual phenomenon, like table-tipping, where it needs to be demonstrated that no one's knees could have been doing the lifting.

Perhaps the most famous of *Most Haunted's* trigger object tests occurred in their first series at the "Derby Gaol" (originally broadcast 27 August 2002). Parapsychologist Jason Karl set up a large crucifix in one of the cells on a piece of paper, traced around the cross with a pen, and then locked the cell door. He joined the crew for dinner and when he returned the cross had clearly moved several millimetres from its original position. In reviewing the videotape footage that had been set up to record if anything happened in the cell, one can clearly see the paper flutter and suddenly jerk back. As the team themselves bemoaned, it is unfortunate that the framing of that locked-off shot was not entirely successful: because the image was framed so tightly, the edge of the paper was out of shot; so it is possible that it was pulled by human, rather than spirit, hands.

In using locked-off cameras for séances, there is a compelling moment at "Bodelwyddan Castle" (series five, originally broadcast 30 November 2004); historian Richard Felix, producer Karl Beattie and lighting rigger Stuart Torvell are conducting a séance in the basement of the castle. They have had some tremendous success with table-tipping and had stopped just for a moment to regroup their thoughts. Beattie and Felix had their fingertips on the table and Torvell sat down between them. Just as his fingers touched the edge, the table leaped a good two or three feet to the right. This kind of evidence, demonstrated by locked-off and stationary cameras, presents the paranormal phenomenon in a largely unmediated way. Of course, the entire show is mediated, as it is on television, but the footage itself does not appear to have been tampered with. It is always possible that some kind of stage effect had been rigged up in order to perpetuate a fraud, but as with the wet spots on the Queen Mary, entertaining "the possible," even if ultimately discounted, is part and parcel of legend-telling.

Each episode ends with a kind of epilogue in which the crew recall their favourite moments of the previous night's investigation, in the literal cold light of the next morning. The role of the parapsychologist comes particularly into play here. Despite the frequent inclusion of a parapsychologist during the investigation, during this short, two-minute or three-minute epilogue, the parapsychologist attempts to find natural explanations for some of the events. In the wake of the article in *The Mirror* quoted above, Ciarán O'Keefe responded on his personal website to a disreputable tabloid newspaper taking some of his comments out of context:

With regards to paranormal phenomena, and mediumship in particular, I am a true skeptic. What that means is that I do not pretend to know the truth: though I continually question the veracity of [a variety of paranormal] claims ... (O'Keefe 2005, no page).

O'Keefe's role as potential debunker of the phenomena experienced on the show is, therefore essential, not only to the show's potential truth-claims about proving the existence of the supernatural, but, more importantly, for the purposes of this paper, to keep the phenomena in the realm of legend by maintaining that sense of doubt as well as belief. In a more recent episode of *Most Haunted*, an investigation

at “Mains Hall” (series seven, originally broadcast 6 December 2005), Beattie and Torvell are keeping vigil in the attic, while the rest of the team are conducting a séance in another part of the Hall. What looks, at first, like a large dusty cobweb floats down quickly past Beattie’s camera, much to his surprise, and a stream of frightened obscenities follows. As an investigator, Beattie’s response is to bring the camera down, following the trajectory of this apparition; had it been a thick cobweb, it would have been observable on the floor. Furthermore, no other similar cobwebs could be seen in the recently renovated attic. Analysis was conducted on this particular piece of remarkable footage, including flipping the image left and right, forwards and backwards. At the end of the episode, even the usually cynical O’Keefe, despite trying to discount the footage as cobwebs, outside lights and reflections in the camera, remains “at a loss for an explanation.”

### *Ofcom, Televisuality and Ostension*

Ofcom, the media regulator in the United Kingdom, has received many complaints regarding *Most Haunted*. The complaints fell into three main areas: (1) that the show “was fraudulent practice”; (2) that “viewers were being deceived into thinking the events depicted were real”; and (3) that “there could be potential harm to susceptible or vulnerable viewers as a result” (Ofcom 2005, no page). According to the *Ofcom Broadcast Bulletin* report, the regulator found the show “not in breach” of the Broadcasting Code. The report makes for fascinating reading, particularly for a folklorist. First, Ofcom refused to comment on the nature of the show, noting that it was not the regulator’s job to police non-normative belief traditions:

It is not Ofcom’s role to decide whether paranormal activity exists, nor to promote or dismiss belief in the paranormal. Our role is to assess programmes such as *Most Haunted* / *Most Haunted Live* against the provisions of our Code (Ofcom 2005, no page).

Significantly, *Most Haunted* is broadcast on LivingTV, which Ofcom recognises as “an entertainment channel” whose programmes must all be seen in the contextual light of such a channel (Ofcom 2005, no page). It fell to Ofcom to ascertain whether *Most Haunted* was “entertainment” or “investigative.” Because the show is broadcast on an entertainment channel, Ofcom concluded that *Most Haunted* constituted more entertainment than investigation and was therefore not in breach of the Broadcasting Code. With particular attention to *Most Haunted Live*, the regulator identified the following indicators of “entertainment”: (1) “a celebrity presenter in the studio,” (2) “a studio audience,” (3) “‘over-dramatic’ responses by the presenters and production team to the events which occur,” (4) “paranormal events occurring with regularity,” and (5) “phone-ins” (Ofcom 2005, no page). Furthermore, Ofcom noted:

along with the graphics, music, and night-vision camera sequences, all suggested a high degree of showmanship that puts it beyond what we believe to be a generally accepted understanding of what comprises a legitimate investigation (Ofcom 2005, no page).

Ofcom’s conclusions do not actually address the charges against the show—accusations of fraud, deception, and potential harm to “susceptible or vulnerable viewers.” However, implicit in Ofcom’s report are suggestions that, counter

to their own mandate of impartiality, the charges of fraud against *Most Haunted* are moot since “investigating” the supernatural is a contradiction in terms—one cannot investigate what does not exist. And if the supernatural *did* exist, such an investigation would not appear on LivingTV, an “entertainment” channel. In other words, Ofcom use a veiled critique of the show’s form in order to avoid an explicit criticism of its content; contemporary news and current affairs shows frequently use similar videographic excesses, but are considered no less “investigative” due to a greater acceptance of the topics being investigated, at least by the “cultural authorities.”

But what of the form and style in *Most Haunted*? To examine *Most Haunted*’s “excessive videographic style,” which is characteristic of reality TV, the discussion must be recontextualised within the context of television studies. John Caldwell has identified an increasing emphasis on American television style beginning in the 1980s (Caldwell 1995, 4). *Most Haunted*, under the rubric of reality TV, emerges out of this tradition of television production. Caldwell characterises contemporary television aesthetics as the search for “excessive style” (Caldwell 1995, 3–31). “Programs battle for identifiable style-markers and distinct looks in order to gain audience share within the competitive broadcast flow” (Caldwell 1995, 5). This search for excess and unique style has manifested itself in two main and differing ways: through the adoption of more “cinematic” (Caldwell 1995, 12) or “videographic” styles (Caldwell 1995, 12). These videographic intensive shows are exemplified by the early reality TV series, which Anette Hill has noted (Hill 2005, 24–7; see also Caldwell 1995, 13). *Most Haunted* is distinctly working within this tradition of “videographic exhibitionism” that characterised early reality TV (Caldwell 1995, 13). Following on from Hill, the examples of videographic exhibitionism vis-à-vis the excesses of visual style in these shows all tend to fall within the non-fiction genres of news and current affairs. While fictional drama series were embracing the more cinematic styles of Hollywood continuity and, thereby, increasing their stylised “realism,” news and current affairs shows were increasingly more videographic in style, thereby increasing the shows’ artificiality, at least at the level of televisuality.

Returning now to a consideration of *Most Haunted*, placing it within the televisual tradition of reality TV, those elements of excessive style (the graphics, music, and night-vision camera sequences) that Ofcom identified as indicators of “entertainment” television are just extensions of existing paradigms of non-fiction representation on television. Part of *Most Haunted*’s videographic exhibitionism is the laying-bare of its own construction wherein the cameras, cables, and sound equipment are often in-shot and the show’s crew become central characters in the investigation, resulting in postmodern reflexivity and self-referentiality. I would argue that the night-vision cinematography, which Ofcom specifically noted as detrimental to the show’s truth-claims, *increases* the show’s veracity by demystifying the investigative methods, techniques, and videographic excesses in a way that other ghost-hunting reality TV shows do not.

Bringing the arguments of ostension back into play here, Dégh and Vázsonyi would not have considered film or television use of legend materials as ostensive. They noted that:

The complete system of theatrical signs maintains this specific duplicity in professional theatre (film, television) and continually reminds the audience that what takes place on the stage is not the showing of reality, not the presentation, but representation, the imitation of a real or imagined reality (Dégh 1995, 239).

Of course, Dégh and Vázsonyi were writing in a period before reality TV and are here referring to fictionalised dramatisations of legend materials. I would disagree that dramatised legend texts on film or television are not ostensive, hence my coining of the term “mass-mediated ostension” to address this issue. The premise of Dégh and Vázsonyi’s argument, however, is that awareness of the theatrical conventions, or, in this context, the laying bare of *Most Haunted’s* televisual construction, denies the possibility of ostensive veracity. In this regard, Dégh and Vázsonyi are in agreement with Ofcom: that the high-level of stylisation of the show imbues it with a more “entertainment”-like quality, and makes it, therefore, less *real* than a “proper” investigation of the paranormal. I would further disagree, and align myself with Caldwell, arguing that the excessive stylisation of the show—*Most Haunted’s* videographic exhibitionism—lays bare the show’s construction and, therefore, within the televisual tradition of reality TV, increases the veracity of the show’s presented evidence. In this regard, Alan Dundes noted what he terms “the visual metaphor” within American culture, wherein visual evidence is tantamount to ontological proof; what *is* is what can be *seen* (Dundes 1980, 86–92). Therefore, by *seeing* the construction of the show, *Most Haunted* attempts to validate its own truth-claims regarding its investigations. And those truth-claims are largely predicated upon what can be *seen*—that is, the *presentation* of supernatural phenomena—and not the representation of those experiences through the telling of legend narratives and memorates. Therefore, contra Dégh and Vázsonyi and contra Ofcom, I would argue that *Most Haunted* is more than just “entertainment”; it is *ostensive* entertainment.

### Conclusion

Ofcom’s report on *Most Haunted* attempts to get itself out of the potentially embarrassing situation of having to comment on supernatural belief traditions vis-à-vis the existence of ghosts, without actually commenting on those beliefs. But the regulator’s bias comes through regardless. By way of a conclusion, I want to try and converge several debates presented here: the televising of legend-trips as ostension and the nature of reality TV, but by adding a third discourse, the issue of “belief” within the scholarship pertaining to the supernatural; it is the televising of these belief debates that demonstrates how the convergence of traditional belief and popular media operates.

David Hufford has noted the marginalisation and trivialisation of “unofficial beliefs”; that is, “folk” beliefs, or those that “develop and operate outside of powerful social structures” (Hufford 1995, 22). “Official beliefs,” on the other hand, “are promulgated through social structures invested with executive authority, while the beliefs themselves are generally based on claims to cultural authority” (Hufford 1995, 22). Taking this argument further, Leonard Primiano noted:

The nature of television is that it expresses individuals' views while simultaneously influencing them. Television media treatment may often trivialize and sensationalize personal experiences of the supernatural, but it can also inspire and inform them (Primiano 2001, 57).

So there is a further dimension to the potential impact a show like *Most Haunted* has, linked with one of the main areas of complaint against the show—that of potentially influencing others to believe in the supernatural. Despite Ofcom's official refusal to comment on, for all intents and purposes, "folk" beliefs in the supernatural, the assumption that this series is "entertainment," not "investigation," attempts to thwart any serious belief in a counter-hegemonic belief tradition by trivialising it in a backhanded way. Despite Ofcom's refusal to appeal directly to those executive authorities (that is, "the Church"), the reflection of those "official beliefs" is implicit in their discounting of the Spiritualist belief tradition as anything other than "for entertainment purposes". Hufford further noted that:

While folk beliefs appear in such communication channels [as television programmes], they are usually either debunked or at least shown as deviant views that contend with consensual reality. Those media that explicitly propagate some folk beliefs ... serve to stigmatize them even as they promote them ... This illustrates the advantage enjoyed by official beliefs over folk beliefs (Hufford 1995, 24).

It strikes me that should a television programme be developed wherein supernatural phenomena are investigated and explicitly demonstrated to be faked, followed by those believers participating in the show publicly humiliated for holding "unofficial beliefs," not only would it be unlikely that any complaints would be made against such a show on the grounds of "fraud," "deception," and "potential damage to susceptible viewers," Ofcom would probably classify such a show as "investigative" despite a hypothetical use of studio audiences, celebrity presenters, over-reactions, and night-vision camerawork. In response to the Ofcom report against *Most Haunted*, beginning in 2006, the *Most Haunted Live* broadcasts have now included a disclaimer at the beginning of each broadcast that the following is "for entertainment purposes only." And, in reiterating Hufford's point, we again see the advantage of official beliefs over folk beliefs.

The problem is, as Hufford noted in a series of three articles (1982, 1983; 1985), "traditions of disbelief" dominate academic studies of the supernatural. He states:

At a time when scientism, as the ideology of science has been called, has so thoroughly captured the central epistemological terrain that a word such as 'rational' has come to mean a proposition with which one would expect a hypothetical modern scientist to agree ... (Hufford 1983, 22).

Science, as well as the academy, has no room for ghosts. "First, we may say that traditions of disbelief in modern Western culture ... operate primarily by criticizing what are believed to be the grounds of the supernatural belief" (Hufford 1982, 48). Research into the paranormal has traditionally appealed to the tenets of "official culture" and its beliefs, therefore, assuming an *a priori* tradition of disbelief in the pseudo-interests of "rationality," "objectivity," and "science." Hufford goes even further:

The problem, of course, is that academic disinterest and pure dedication to truth is mere self-deception, as the comparison of scholarship *per se* and scholarly ideology helps to demonstrate.

The academic biases against supernatural belief are, in fact, primarily ideological in nature, and derive from historical events that are fascinating and important ... (Hufford 1983, 25).

This ideology of scientism and its effects on the scholarship of belief are far reaching. Why is skepticism the precedent for research? Why, as again Hufford noted, is even agnosticism toward the supernatural seen as subversive and antagonistic? Why are we, as academics, so negative when it comes to belief (Hufford 1983, 28)? The problem with the *a priori* assumption of skepticism is that it creates an artificial binary opposition—belief/disbelief—when, as Ellis noted, disbelief and skepticism are just as significant to the legend-process in its dissemination as are believers; we tell stories, and thereby pass on the legends, even when we *do not* believe (Ellis 2003, 116).

A television series like *Most Haunted* becomes central to these, largely unanswerable, questions. Like the legend-trip, *Most Haunted* takes the viewer on a rite of passage into the haunted legends the show investigates. Whether we believe in the ability of the psychic mediums' ability to channel the spirits of the dead, or even in the presentation of physical phenomena, both the investigating team and the television audience are asked to consider the possibility of the supernatural's existence. As a form of reality TV, the series challenges one's assumptions regarding the various truth-claims being made—that this is either paranormal, or even "real." As both Bill Ellis (1981) and Gary Hall have argued regarding legend-trips, neither uncritical belief nor active disbelief is appropriate to the legend-trip; all that is asked of both legend-trippers and *Most Haunted* viewers is that they "do not *disbelieve*." "Questions of actual belief or nonbelief are largely irrelevant during the drama and excitement of the trip" (Ellis 1981, 496). Linda Dégh, in discussing the legend genre in general, likens the legend process to a court case with belief on one side and disbelief on the other. However, as she argues, *unlike* a court case, there is rarely any compromise between believers and disbelievers:

Why? Perhaps because the debate in a court of law tackles the affairs of individuals, and is generally limited to personal problems; legends, on the other hand, treat universal concerns. They deal with the most crucial questions of the world and human life. They attack these questions: Is the order of the world really as we learned to know it? Can we expect that life will run its course as we were taught it should? Do we know all the forces that regulate the universe and our life, or are there hidden dimensions that can divert the casual, rational flow of things? And if there are unknown forces, can they be identified, changed, avoided, or exploited to our benefit (Dégh 2001, 1–2)?

Legends, legend-trips, explorations into the supernatural and television programmes like *Most Haunted* challenge our understanding of the world we live in. Such challenges may ultimately be dismissed or rejected, but the challenge itself was what was important. Perhaps, one of the reasons we tend to react so strongly to the supernatural is, as Dégh suggested regarding the legend, "[it] touches upon the most sensitive areas of our existence" (Dégh 2001, 2). And that is not always comfortable. As Yvette Fielding ends each broadcast of *Most Haunted*, "sleep tight."

## Notes

- [1] Ivo Osolsobě bridges the gap between Augustine and Eco: "For centuries Augustine's ideas on showing were nearly forgotten, and *Concerning the Teacher* [*De Magistro*] was read almost

exclusively as a theological treatise. Only Comenius, also concerned with teaching, made showing one of the most important principles of his didactics . . . . Later the idea of communication by means of things was ridiculed by Swift in the [Lagado Academy] episode of *Gulliver's Travels*. Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein, however, insisted that proper wisdom is conveyed by things rather than signs (Osolsobě 1994, 657). Thanks to Gillian Bennett for pointing me in this direction. See also Dégh and Vázsonyi (1983) and Eco (1976, 224–6).

- [2] In a later piece, Ellis noted “*Pseudo-ostension* involves a hoax in which the participant produces evidence that the legend has been enacted: teens often fabricate evidence of cult sacrifices, even to the extent of killing animals and leaving occult symbols behind at the site” (Ellis 2003, 162).
- [3] Fielding, Acorah and Paul noted that “the 2004 Hallowe’en [*Most Haunted Live*] special received higher viewing figures than any programme on terrestrial channels at the time—the first and only time this has happened” (2005, 16).
- [4] It should come as no surprise that there are a number of supernatural reality TV shows. Linda Dégh noted: “The international demand for trained ghost hunters seems to have emerged around the same time [as the Amityville haunting in the mid-1970s]; *The Ghost Hunter's Guide* by Peter Underwood, the president and chief investigator of the Ghost Club (founded in 1862), was issued simultaneously in London, New York and Sydney in 1986” (Dégh 2001, 325). Dégh continued: “Recent times have also seen a considerable increase in local psi practitioners, clairvoyants, palmists, and seers. Their prestige has grown through their magazine columns, tabloid prophecies, and above all, their invited assistance of law enforcement agencies in difficult criminal investigations” (Dégh 2001, 325). Yvette Fielding and Ciarán O’Keefe recently published a how-to guide, *Ghost Hunters: A Guide to Investigating the Paranormal* (2006), thereby tying the vogue for do-it-yourself ghost hunting into the fandom of their television show.
- [5] See *Fear* (MTV, 2000–2002).
- [6] See *Ghost Hunters* (Sci-Fi, 2004–present).
- [7] See *Scariest Places on Earth* (ABC Family, 2000–2004).

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