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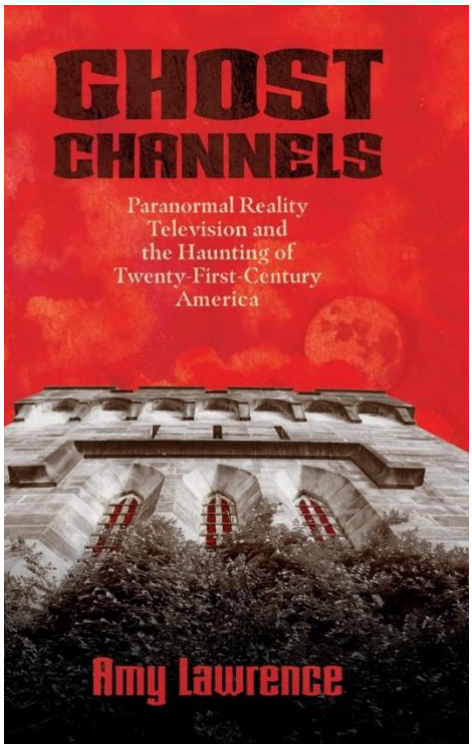

BOOK REVIEW

Ghost Channels: Paranormal Reality Television and the Haunting of Twenty-First Century America

By Amy Lawrence
University Press of Mississippi
2022

268pp.

Paranormal reality television has been a staple on cable channels, and now streaming services, since the turn of the millennium. On the heels of the reality TV boom with programs including *Survivor* (2000-present) and *Big Brother* (2000-present), as well as the phenomenal success of paranormal films such as *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) and *Paranormal Activity* (2007-21), paranormal reality TV has proven to be an enduring subgenre. Amy Lawrence's new book *Ghost Channels: Paranormal Reality Television and the Haunting of Twenty-First Century America*, the first monograph dedicated to the scholarly study of the subgenre, provides thorough analyses of a variety of shows including *Ghost Hunters*, *Ghost Adventures*, *Long Island Medium*, *Paranormal State*, *Celebrity Ghost Stories*, and more. Indeed, Lawrence writes, "Between 2004 and 2019, over six dozen documentary-style series dealing with paranormal subject matter premiered on television in the United States," demonstrating the surprisingly saturated market of this televisual niche (3). Lawrence's central argument, however, is a familiar one for those well versed in horror scholarship: paranormal reality television, as a popular genre form, reveals "the fears of a particular cultural moment" (13). Although the book contains many insights that demonstrate the socio-cultural and political import of the supernatural in our contemporary epoch, including, as Lawrence writes, "the precariousness of deeply held beliefs about who Americans are, what the country stands for […] and who must pay for the past" (214), the book too often defines paranormal reality television strictly as a representation of, or reaction to, contemporary crises while sidelining the rich

and nuanced histories of haunting. The book's best moments occur when Lawrence embeds the current vogue for paranormal reality television within the deep-seated history of haunting in American culture, outlining the versatility and representational power of the ghost. *Ghost Channels* nevertheless offers a valuable taxonomy of the subgenre, delineating the form, structure, and function of these shows while importantly emphasising why ghosts continue to matter.

Across seven chapters, Lawrence demonstrates how, despite the variation in format, all paranormal reality television is constituted by a paradoxical imperative to establish the ordinariness of the extraordinary. The first chapter "Paranormal Survivors: Validating the Struggling Middle Class" discusses what Lawrence calls the first-person paranormal show, in which an individual is interviewed describing their supernatural experiences while re-enactments represent their accounts. Here, eye-witness testimony is foregrounded as the "privileged source of evidence" as the interviewee seeks validation of their personal experiences (25-26). Lawrence's allegorical hermeneutic is evidenced when she describes *The Haunted, Paranormal Witness*, and *When Ghosts Attack!* as parables depicting "when a good house goes bad" (29). Interviewees describe their dreams of home ownership succumbing to nightmares of supernatural dispossession, "using spectral metaphors to stand in for issues and effects they cannot articulate otherwise" (32). Despite this initial dismissal of ghostly encounters as metaphor, Lawrence acknowledges that witnesses are not speaking metaphorically and evince a genuine belief in their supernatural experience (33). Certainly, these programs engage with the contemporaneous housing crisis and middle-class financial instability, as Lawrence demonstrates; however, the haunted house has endured through centuries—millennia—and would therefore seem to evince a perpetual concern with the essential instability of the notion of property, thereby resonating far beyond the Great Recession of 2008 and the housing crisis highlighted by the book's allegorical take on haunted houses.

The second chapter, "Ghost Hunters: Men on Edge" distinguishes the first-person paranormal show of the previous chapter with the investigative mode of ghost hunting. Lawrence identifies this mode as "fundamentally conservative" as ghost hunting shows are male-dominated enterprises concerned with recuperating fragile masculinity within technophilic logics of reason and outward displays of aggression (53). Lawrence persuasively argues that these shows rely on technologies such as night-vision cameras, EMF readers, EVP recorders, SLS cameras, REM pods and so on, in an effort to avoid the feminized 'passivity' of traditional mediumship and construct a sense

of masculine mastery and control. "If you do not establish yourself as the master of technology," Lawrence writes, "you risk becoming the technology" (80). The gendered politics of paranormal reality TV is further explored in the third chapter "My Favourite Medium: Women's Work" in which psychic mediums like Theresa Caputo in *Long Island Medium* must minimize their extraordinary power by emphasizing their status as ordinary suburban moms (90). This is accomplished by situating scenes of psychic readings within domestic settings of the home and kitchen, presenting psychic abilities as a gift that provides support and comfort, and by including non-supernatural storylines within its episodes. Referencing the visibility of female mediums in the 19th century and their advocacy for liberal policies including universal suffrage and abolition, Lawrence argues these programs tame the transgressive power of mediumship by couching their psychic ability in ignorance. That is, the psychic often does not know or understand what message they are communicating to their client; what matters is that communication happens: quite literally, the medium is the message.

The book's best chapter is its fifth, entitled "Abandoned Institutions: 'It's in the Walls.'" Lawrence examines the predominance of decaying buildings in ghost hunting shows, particularly hospitals, prisons, and asylums, as "hollowed-out monuments to reason, scientific progress, and social control" (134). Like Bentham's panopticon, these institutions sought to discipline their inhabitants and induce moral and spiritual reformation, exorcising criminality from the subject and imposing state-sanctioned 'civility.' The crumbling walls of buildings like Waverly Hills Sanitorium, a location that has re-appeared numerously in ghost-hunting shows, therefore simultaneously signify "idealism and failure," (135): the utopian belief in modernity and progress and its failure to actualize a better future. Lawrence provides a fascinating discussion of architectural design and the goal of stopping the spread of sound in the halls of prisons and asylums in an effort to limit communication amongst the institutionalized. Prisoners, however, learned to employ noise—knocks, tapping—in order to communicate, forming a telegraphic system of communication not unlike the rappings of a Spiritualist séance or the conventional sounds of hauntings (139-140).

Lawrence highlights an important ethical dimension that is often neglected in discussions of paranormal reality television; that is, that the systemic violence and suffering of real people, often the most marginalized in our society, is used as fodder for sensationalized supernatural programming. The use of archival, historical photographs that depict real people and use real names, for example, is particularly problematic (153). The question of ethics and

our collective responsibility continues in the sixth chapter "In America There is Real Evil: Excluded Americans." Lawrence rightly criticizes the depiction of Black and Native American peoples in the subgenre: "Present as an idea but absent as individuals, both groups haunt contemporary popular culture while being denied an actual presence" (161). In these programs, Black and Native American peoples appear either as ephemeral spirits or witnesses describing their experiences to teams of mostly white, mostly male investigators. Even more pernicious for Lawrence is the way in which these shows situate the horrors of colonialism and racism firmly within the past, obscuring the current manifestations of racial oppression and white supremacy. "The most reassuring thing about history as depicted in these programs," Lawrence writes, "is its utter disconnectedness from the present. For the hosts of paranormal TV, 'history' is something that happened to someone else" (162). The show *Ghost Brothers* therefore stages a significant intervention as it centres a team of Black investigators as protagonists, a rarity in the subgenre. Lawrence demonstrates how *Ghost Brothers* engages with ghosts differently from its ghost-hunting peers, approaching the victims of systemic violence with respect and deference rather than with demands of exposure like "show yourself" that often characterize paranormal investigation.

What ghosts consistently epitomize, of course, is the co-presence of present and past, the inability of the past to be fully externalized, othered, or construed as 'finished.' Spectrality is, as Frederic Jameson (1995) articulated, "what makes the present waver" (85). What haunting ultimately demonstrates is our collective responsibility to the past, to a history that continues to make demands of us and to a future that awaits fulfillment. Lawrence's critiques of paranormal reality television as fundamentally conservative are well taken, but belie the function of the ghost as an agent of historical refusal: a refusal to fully vanish. The ghost is inevitably and inherently an entity of radical potentiality. To be sure, Lawrence expresses this sentiment when she writes, "Belief in the paranormal is a declaration of doubt—an assertion that established belief systems of any kind have not, will not, or cannot explain everything" (132). Despite the book's overreliance on the allegorical function of paranormal reality television, *Ghost Channels* is a valuable, insightful, and thought-provoking contribution to scholarship concerning the supernatural and popular culture as it navigates the ways in which televisual form attempts, and fails, to fully contain the transgressive power of the ghost.

— Kevin Chabot

Kevin Chabot holds a PhD in Cinema Studies from the University of Toronto. His research examines the relationships between contemporary media and the supernatural with a particular focus on the ghost as a transmedial figure. His research interests include: film theory, spectrality, horror film, paranormal investigation, intermediality, and documentary evidence. His work has appeared in *Shift: Graduate Journal of Visual and Material Culture*, *Film International*, and the anthology *Horror in Space: Critical Essays on a Film Subgenre* (2017).

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