

The Spirits of Radio: Remediated Spiritualism, the Ghost Box and Paranormal Reality TV

Abstract

The article considers the historic role of wireless telegraphic and radio technology in the context of nineteenth century spiritualism and argues that, via the modern Spirit or Ghost Box device, radio continues to reflect this close association in the context of contemporary ghost hunting reality TV shows. Through the examination of two paranormal reality TV examples: *Ghost Adventures* and *Ghosts of Devil's Perch*, the article explores the ongoing importance of radio as a channel argued to be able to contact the spirits of the dead. The article stresses that there is a clear modern continuity with the association of media technology with historic spiritualists but also discusses how ghost hunters use the Ghost Box to work alongside psychic mediums to enhance the validity of contact with ghosts. In this way, while the Ghost Box takes an element of the role of the psychic medium, it still needs a human factor in the interpretation of messages and so radio technology is a distinctive example of technological spiritual communication but one that retains, albeit in a remediated way, the connections made between spiritualism and wireless communication in the nineteenth century. Furthermore, the availability of ghost hunting technology like that used in paranormal reality TV has also made ghost hunting a distinctive form of participatory media, further elucidating the links between spiritualist and wireless forms of paranormal communication.

Keywords: radio, mediums, spiritualism, reality TV, Ghost Box, media, Radio Voice Phenomenon, wireless communication

Supernatural Communication

In the book *Hauntology: Ghosts of Futures Past*, Merlin Coverley argues that contemporary culture is “preoccupied by the supernatural...captivated by the revenants of an earlier age” (Coverley 7). However, unlike Jacques Derrida’s political specters ‘coming back’ to haunt the modern world (11), contemporary media culture now presents a host of television shows based on the investigation of haunted places, featuring the quest to document evidence of the existence of ghosts, and to make active contact with them. This article examines this in the context of Instrumental Transcommunication (ITC), a practice that is based on the idea of communication with the dead and traditionally associated with both spiritualism and from the 1960s with EVP recordings (Bekavac 9). The article examines this phenomenon from a media perspective, looking at how the figure of the medium, held to possess the power to use their bodies to become “the bridge between the two worlds, blurring the distinction between life and death” (Kontou 3) remains a presence in modern media culture, but how technology has also enabled ghost-hunters to effectively “speak” with the dead in

a similar fashion. Yet, this is a significant connection because, as Anthony Enns argues of the historic links between spiritualism and sound technology, spiritualists experimented with sound as part of their demonstrations of apparent communion with spirits, from nineteenth century trumpet manifestations, whereby musical instruments played themselves, to more contemporary use of electronic voice phenomena. Such a combination of spiritualism, media technology and the hunt for ghosts has not only persisted but has intensified in the twenty-first century.

Through an exploration of examples of paranormal reality TV based on ghost-hunting that consistently showcases radio-based ITC technology, the article will focus on one example related to radio technology: the device variously dubbed “Frank’s Box” (after its initial creation by Frank Sumption in 2002), the Spirit Box, Geo Box, the Polterpod, or the Ghost Box (which the device will be referred to throughout the article), that has become increasingly prevalent in paranormal investigation reality TV shows. In the context of exploring the history of ghosts and hauntings, Lisa Morton defines the Ghost Box as a technology that is “designed to facilitate spoken communication from discarnate entities. The ghost box may be a modified AM/FM radio, or it may be a device produced specifically for paranormal investigating” (Morton 133). The idea of a technology that could enable ghosts to speak was claimed to have been realized in the 1930s with the creation of the “sound box,” an apparatus that united Spiritualist practice with media technology as it used ectoplasm emanating from a medium which formed an ‘ectoplasmic larynx’ that could speak into a microphone connected to a loudspeaker and so enable spirits directly communicate with the living (Enns). Furthermore, Thomas A. Edison inspired the sound box through his legendary “lost” technology, the “spirit phone,” a device that would see science, not spiritualism, contact the dead. As Edison stated:

I have been at work for some time building an apparatus to see if it is possible for personalities which have left this earth to communicate with us...If this is ever accomplished it will be accomplished not by any occult, mystifying, mysterious or weird means, such as are employed by so-called *mediums*, but by scientific methods (Tablang).

With the creation of Frank’s Box, Sumption claimed to have realized Edison’s vision (of which no prototype or blueprints remained), “facilitating real-time, two-way communication with the spirit world” (Moon and Moon 2). While there were few versions of the Ghost Box made by Sumption, variations of it have become common in the paranormal investigator community, leading to “a ghostbox/ITC craze” (Sagers), and incorporating ITC media and the communicative powers of the spiritual medium into a single device. Likewise, while ghost detecting technology is a central aspect of many paranormal reality TV shows, the mix of the abilities of psychic mediums and electronic technologies central to the sound box are evident, and the article will argue that this subgenre of reality TV continues to espouse the nature of mediumistic skills in tandem with ghost-hunting endeavors and so represents a continuation of the historic connection between communication media and spiritualism and presents this

as a form of entertainment as much as investigations to determine the validity of ghosts.

With reference to historic discussions of ghosts and hauntings, the analysis of paranormal reality TV, and early supernatural perceptions of telegraphic and radio communication, the article will consider how the concept of 'haunted media' has radically been updated in contemporary media culture in terms of the nature of paranormal reality TV, and Ghost Box technology that uses radio waves as its mode of contact. In focusing on two examples of paranormal reality TV that employ the Ghost Box extensively: the long-running *Ghost Adventures* and the more recent *Ghosts of Devil's Perch*, the article will argue that the Ghost Box represents a distinctive remediation of elements of the role of psychic mediums using contemporary radio technology but also a clear continuity with the longstanding link between spiritualism and radio.

Spiritualism, Ghost Hunting and Radio

While ghost stories and active accounts of contacts with the dead preceded the nineteenth century (Natale) and encounters with ghosts are recorded in Mesopotamian antiquity (Finkel), in the sociological and historical study *Spiritualism and Society*, Geoffrey K. Nelson argues that the foundation of what would rapidly become the spiritualist movement was 1848, the year that the Fox family in Rochester, New York reported sounds in their house which led daughters Margaretta and Kate Fox to begin to communicate with a spirit purported to be that of a murdered peddler, Charles B. Roena, through tapping/rapping sounds (Nelson 4). In the wake of the reporting of this supernatural sensation, spiritualist groups rapidly arose and spread, united by two core beliefs:

1. The human personality, in some form, survives the death of the body.
2. That it is possible to communicate, in some way, with the 'spirits' of the dead (Nelson 205).

For Nelson, the mechanisms employed by mediums to establish contact with spirits included spirit (or automatic) writings and spirit drawing, in which the individual wrote out or drew images communicated by the deceased; clairvoyance or clairaudience, in which they would report seeing and hearing spirits; spiritual impersonation, whereby the medium would take on characteristics of a dead individual, and even in some instances the direct possession of the medium's body by a spirit (Nelson). Yet, while rapidly establishing itself as a new religious movement, spiritualism equally quickly became a form of public entertainment spectacle, in which public séances incorporated distinctive elements of theatricality (Natale). Accordingly, in 1849, in the Corinthian Hall in Rochester, the Fox sisters demonstrated spirit communication for the first time before a paying public (Natale), signaling the addition of spiritualists to celebrity culture, alongside star mediums such as Daniel Dunglas Home who

performed for European royalty (Melechi), and prefiguring representations of spirits in early cinema, thus contributing to the presence of ghosts as “part of a burgeoning popular culture” (Natale 116). This cultural visibility was evidenced by ghosts appearing in the early films of Georges Méliès and Houdini’s visual experiments (Schenkel), the creation of ghost effects on theatre stages in the form of ‘Pepper’s Ghost’ (Coverley 39), and the use of early cameras in the practice of spirit photography, which purported to offer visual evidence of the existence of ghosts (Williams 149). Spirit photography was best exemplified by William Mumler’s famous photograph of Mary Todd Lincoln that also showed the ghostly presence of Abraham Lincoln behind her (Piepenbring). However, the connection of spiritualists and media went beyond representations of the supernatural and was inherent in the nature how mediums connected with the spirit world, as the historian of British spiritualism Jenny Hazelgrove explains, mediumship became analogous with the telephone and wireless. From this perspective, just as people tuned in to wireless broadcasts, so sensitives tuned in to the other world (Hazelgrove). Yet, as Jeffrey Sconce, in *Haunted Media*, maintains, the connections between spiritualism and these early mass communication technologies were especially close in nineteenth century America, because:

Within a five-year span in the 1840s, the American public witnessed two of the most remarkable moments in telecommunications history. On 24 May 1844 friends and observers gathered with Samuel B. Morse at the Supreme Court in Washington, D.C., to participate in the first official test of an electromagnetic telegraph line [...] In 1848 Kate and Margaretta Fox reportedly communicated through raps and knocks with a spirit dubbed ‘Mr. Split-foot’ (Sconce 23-24).

This period saw the public establishment and visibility of both an “electromagnetic” and “spiritual” form of telegraph. Furthermore, a significant factor of this period is that many in the spiritualist community sought to directly associate their practices with those of “electrical science” and to stress the similarities of their practices with that of telegraphic communication, even positing that spirits were part of the functioning of telegraphy, as they were “convinced of its parallel existence in the world of the dead” (Sconce 37). This, then, represented a unique moment whereby media communication technology merged “into spiritualism, science into the occult” (Kneale 93). While a specific “scientific spiritualism” allied to the telegraph would wane by the end of the nineteenth century, the association between spirit communication and media intensified with the invention of wireless broadcast technology, principally by Guglielmo Marconi in 1885, and its new ability to conjure voices ‘from the void.’ As such:

The arrival of Marconi’s astounding wireless system at the dawn of the new century promised to unlock the mystical enigmas of the ether, that mysterious substance once believed to be the invisible medium through which all light, electricity, and magnetism (Sconce 61).

The mysteriousness of early radio, a device that could project the sound of voices from the air, meant that in relation to the veracity of mediums, the “idea of people themselves being akin to radio sets, able to tune in to etheric voices, suddenly did not seem implausible” (Clarke 278-279) and there was even speculation in sections of the early-twentieth-century scientific community “about the similarities between wireless technology and spiritualist séances” (Enns 146). Moreover, speculations that the human brain could contain the ability to transmit messages further identified radio as a technology distinctively in tune with spiritual communication and so “allowed scientists and spiritualists alike to envision the complete integration of the mind and the electric media environment” (Enns 18). But even beyond its links with mediumship, the nature of early radio drew out wider evocations of the supernatural. One example was its depiction of contacting “ghostlands” in terms of short-lived radio contacts, while another was the practice of DX (Distant Stations) fishing, whereby users would search through the radio dials for transmissions from the most distant points around the nation and globe, a journey traversed primarily across mysterious expanses of silence and static’ (Sconce 65). Hence, as the media theorist Marshall McLuhan argues:

Radio is provided with its cloak of invisibility, like any other medium. It comes to us ostensibly with person-to-person directness that is private and intimate, while in more urgent fact, it is really a subliminal echo chamber of magical power to touch remote and forgotten chords (McLuhan 302).

Early wireless represented an information channel “without any materiality” (Kittler 165) and the fervent reactions to it reflected an appetite for “otherworldly contact, for communion with disembodied spirits, for imaginative escapades that affirmed there was still wonder in the world” (Susan Douglas in Noakes, 141). In the 1960s Konstantin Raudive (building on Attila von Szalay and Friedrich Jürgenson’s experiments) established “electronic voice phenomena,” or EVP (replaying ambient tape recordings to discern voices of the dead), and then extended this technique to radio. Raudive achieved this using “a standard radio receiver to make spiritual contact, confirming once again the world’s intuitive investment in the uncanny qualities of the electromagnetic spectrum” (Sconce 84). Compared with EVP:

Over the course of his research, Raudive found the medium of radio to be a favored form of contact. Writing of the radio voices, Raudine observed, “They differ from microphone-voices in that their pronunciation is clearer and their messages are longer and have more meaning” (Sconce 86).

The legacy of this use of radio is that ghost hunters no longer need to put faith solely in mediums to establish contact with spirits but can employ their own channels of communicative technology, a practice central in the reality TV “ghost craze” (Groff and Belanger 33). Furthermore, while EVP remains an essential element on many

paranormal reality TV shows, the use of radio-based Ghost/Spirit Box technologies has established Radio Voice Phenomenon (RVP) as a further mode of Instrumental Transcommunication (Ashford).

Reality TV Ghost Hunting

A scientific approach to the investigation of ghosts found expression in the 1880s with the establishment of the American and British Societies of Psychical Research, but even though their *raison d'être* was to methodically investigate and debunk the paranormal, as the psychologist William James reflected of the efforts of the SPR, in the face of “scientific strikes against the supernatural” [...] the ghosts kept coming back, the visions yet glimmered, the voices yet sounded” (Blum 25). This remains the case as credence in ghosts has endured, with research (in Britain) reporting that as belief in mainstream religion declines, a counter belief in ghosts has increased (Wilton) while four in ten people believe in ghosts in the USA (Statista). In this way, as Roger Clarke, in *A Natural History of Ghosts*, observes: “ghosts exist because people constantly report that they see them” (17).

While Elliott O'Donnell first coined the term “ghost hunt” in *Confessions of a Ghost-Hunter*, published in 1928, it was the activities of Harry Price who would give ghost hunting public prominence. Significantly, Price made an early connection between broadcast media and the supernatural as he made live broadcasts from haunted houses with the BBC in the 1930s, establishing a link between ghost hunting and showmanship, whereby haunted houses were “staked out, recorded, scrutinized with technology [and] placed the investigator at the centre of the story” (Clarke 26). Price explained the approach and experiences of the modern ghost-hunter in his book *The Story of Borley Rectory: The Most Haunted House in England*, an account of a decade-long investigation of Borley Rectory and its ghost sightings that included a headless coachman and ghostly horses, various objects thrown by invisible forces, poltergeist activity, and a spectral nun. In the book, Price sets out the key components of the ghost-hunter's kit, with an especial focus on the use of technology, such as cameras, film-packs and flashbulbs for indoor and outdoor photography and a cinematograph camera with remote electrical control, and films (Price).

The primacy of technology and entertainment in Price's investigations would prove to be influential, with later ghost-hunters such as Hans Holzer, whose book *Ghost Hunter* (published in 1963) charted investigations conducted in America (and frequently in New York) in the 1950s (leading to a series of paranormal-themed television shows). While frequently working with a psychic medium to investigate haunted sites (as did Price on occasion), Holzer stressed that the two key parameters of ghost hunting were “to establish the key facts of the reported paranormal phenomenon and to make contact with the spirit” (Holzer 8). As Owen Davies argues of the continued cultural visibility of the paranormal in *The Haunted: A Social History of Ghosts*, there “is no doubt that the media has [...] played its part in maintaining the cultural relevancy of ghosts via novels, radio, cinema, and television” (246). Certainly, television has proven to be a significant factor in this regard, with a plethora of reality TV shows based on the probing of haunted locations and Holzer's approach has

played an influential role on reality TV shows ghost hunters (Sagers), and *The Holzer Files* sees a paranormal investigative team return to Holzer's original investigations. While reality television is, as Karen Williams argues in the context of a study of hauntings and Reality TV, predicated on capturing the real or the everyday, ghost hunting shows blur the boundaries of the "factual and fictional, real and unreal, subjective and objective" (Williams 150) and are invariably based on capturing paranormal activities "on nighttime investigations in allegedly haunted locations" (Hill 66).

In the context of an analysis of paranormal media Alicia Edwards emphasizes that ghost-hunting television shows represent "a hybrid genre intersecting reality TV and history" (Edwards 1314), with early examples such as the British series *Most Haunted* (2002-2010/2014-2019) showcasing investigations of reportedly haunted sites that combined the use of night-vision technologies, UV light sensors and EVPs with the readings of psychic mediums. Alternatively, the long-running American reality TV show *Ghost Hunters* (2004-present day) follows supernatural investigations conducted by members of the Atlantic Paranormal Society (TAPS), whose investigations represent one of the most successful examples of the subgenre. As Alissa Burger's analysis of ghost hunter-based reality TV highlights, the TAPS approach is one that echoes the SPR in that technology is the most prominent aspect of investigations of reported haunted places to "replace campfire story spookiness with a critical approach, educated skepticism, and high-tech equipment" and gadgets such as 'infrared and night-vision cameras, digital voice recorders and electromagnetic field detectors' that give the investigations "a scientific backbone" (Burger 163,166).

The ratings success of *Ghost Hunters* reflected a modern cultural beguilement with the supernatural and helped to establish a vibrant paranormal reality TV subculture (Blake). So, while audiences engage with such shows from a variety of positions, from belief, skepticism, or claims that they are "overdramatized" (Hill 73), a slew of ghost-hunting reality TV shows have been (and continue to be) produced since the early 2000s, such as: *Dead Famous: Ghostly Encounters* (2004–2006), *Ghost Hunt* (2005-2006), *Paranormal State* (2007-2011), *Ghost Adventures* (2008-present), *The Dead Files* (2011-), *Haunted Highway* (2012-2013), *Ghost Bait* (2013-2013/2019-2019), *Ghost Asylum* (2014-2016), *Haunted Towns* (2017-2019), *Paranormal Lockdown* (2016-2019), *Ghost Brothers* (2016-2017), *Ghost Brothers: Lights Out* (2021-present), *Destination Fear* (2019-2023), *Kindred Spirits* (2016-), *Ghosts of Shepherdstown* (2016-2017), *Celebrity Ghost Hunt* (2017-2018), *Help! My House is Haunted* (2018-), *Ghost Nation* (2019-2021), *Haunted Salem: Live* (2019), *The Holzer Files* (2019-2021), *Portals to Hell* (2019-2022), *Death Walker* (2020-), *Travel the Dead* (2022-), *The Ghost Town Terror* (2022-), *Spooked Scotland* (2022), *Conjuring Kesha* (2022-), *Ghosts of Devil's Perch* (2022), *Spooked Ireland* (2023) and *Paranormal: The Girl, The Ghost and the Gravestone* (2023). While the specific approaches of these shows vary, technology is frequently a crucial factor, and the Ghost Box is a key technology used to ascertain the veracity of haunted sites and to attempt to contact spirits.

Paranormal Reality TV and the Ghost Box 1: *Ghost Adventures*

First broadcast in 2008, *Ghost Adventures* is led by key investigator and show producer Zak Bagans (with a team that has consisted of Nick Groff, Aaron Goodwin, Billy Tolley, and Jay Wasley, in addition to occasional celebrity guest investigators), and the show is based on a series of ghost hunting investigations of allegedly haunted locations. The episodes begin with an opening credits sequence that consists of rapidly edited shots from the series intercut with (reenacted) scenes of ghosts and supernatural entities. As such, the spaces between the natural and the supernatural collide because *Ghost Adventures* mixes the presentation of objective reality-based paranormal investigations with media tropes such as the suspense and scare strategies of the horror genre (Sayad). As Amy Lawrence states in the book *Ghost Channels*, the introductory segment of many paranormal reality TV shows consists of:

Fast-paced montages, images of death (skulls, cemeteries), disturbing music; sensational and gory, these stylistic flourishes signal that we are entering the realm of horror, a destabilizing genre that disturbs assumptions about family, identity, bodily integrity, the reliability of perception, the security of the domestic sphere, and the predictability of time and space, upending the natural order (Lawrence 11).

At the beginning of each *Ghost Adventures* episode, Bagans sets the scene for the investigation, telling the team (and viewers) about the history of the locale (such as hotels, private houses, hospitals, forests, mills, ships, abandoned mines, castles, museums, ships, caverns, burial sites, prisons, and abandoned sanatoriums) and the details of their hauntings. Each episode includes an eerie and atmospheric soundtrack, with portentous music added to witness testimonies, mirroring one of horror cinema's most effective way of "eliciting fear in film" (Sbravatti 45), enhancing the supernatural phenomena the series explores. Following interviews with people associated with the locations (homeowners, managers, employees, or ex-employees), the team engage in the lockdown section where the team spends a night in the haunted location and attempt to contact the spirits reported to haunt the spaces. While Bagans has discussed in autobiographical books such as *I Am Haunted: Living Life Through the Dead* of his belief that he is sensitive to supernatural presences and stresses the importance of ritual and religious practices as part of ghost hunting (in addition to the occasional input by psychics and exorcists), technology is central to the lockdowns. This includes SLS (Structured Light Sensor) cameras (which use an infrared laser grid to theoretically be able to visually detect spirits invisible to the human eye and represent them visually as stick figures), Rem Pods (designed to detect disruptions in the electromagnetic field when spirits manifest), thermal sensors to detect sudden drops in temperature (held to be an indicator of ghostly presences), and Ovilus and paranormal puck devices which enable (theoretically) spirits to select words from a database by using their energy and so "speak" to the investigators directly. More directly, the group also extensively use digital recorders as EVP devices to play back vocal recordings to discern the sounds of "discarnate beings" (Bekavac 11).

While central to modern paranormal reality TV, the idea of a 'spirit detector' machine was claimed to have been invented by J.L. W.P. Matla and G.J. Zaalberg van Zelst in 1916 in the form of the electromechanical "dynamistograph," a machine that printed messages from the dead and so "avoided mediums and the contributions they added to the intelligence from the other world" (Noakes 147). Such an approach is central to the narrative of *Ghost Adventures* in the long running use of the 'wireless' Spirit/Ghost Box (including the SB7 box and in later seasons the Polterpod - an updated version of the device which sweeps more radio frequencies and ten times faster than the SB7) that represents an essential (and dramatic) element in the *Ghost Adventures* investigations. While there are paranormal investigators that hold that the original Frank's Box requires the user to possess mediumistic abilities and to work with "Spirit Technicians" (Moon and Moon 3), *Ghost Adventures* illustrates how non-mediums can use such radio-based machines to directly "speak" to spirits and receive messages from the dead. As Bagans explains of the machine and its value to ghost hunters:

The spirit box is a controversial piece of equipment, but I believe in it. It scans AM and FM radio frequencies very rapidly...so we can tap into the radio waves portion of the electromagnetic spectrum. A major belief in the paranormal field is that ghosts are made up of electromagnetic energy. If that's true, then it stands to reason that they would try to communicate through the electromagnetic audio spectrum, and radio waves are in the electromagnetic spectrum. So, if ghosts reside in the electromagnetic spectrum, then it makes sense to use radio waves to communicate with them, which is why the spirit box is so effective (Bagans and Crigger 207).

The gadget, developed from Sumption's Ghost Box, developed in the early 2000s, uses standard radio frequency ranges used by broadcasters on the AM (535 to 1064 KHz) and FM (88 to 108 MHz) radio spectrum. This produces a mixture of static, white noise, and snippets of radio broadcast on those frequencies (Ashford) until the listener discerns a voice (usually consisting of one-to-three-word utterances) from the box. From these rapid scans of the AM/FM spectrum, Bagans and other members of the team have conducted "conversations" with single or multiple spirits (as a group or alone in isolated parts of the location). These communications, while subject to the interpretations of the investigative team, are frequently proffered as evidence of "intelligent" spirit responses and the presence of a ghost(s). By using technological devices such as the Ghost Box, responses to direct questions, the communication of names (the spirits' names, or the identification of the investigators), or statements such as "I'm dead" or more ominous and dramatic messages such as "I killed," represent media-facilitated evidence that intelligent spirits are present in the locations, that ghosts do indeed exist, and that these voices give validity to each investigation. In this sense, while mediums (and even exorcists) are sometimes present, the investigators habitually "flaunt their use of use of technology – evidence of their "scientific" process – by making the technology (often some kind of digital media) extra-visible" (Lawrence

68). So, while Bagans does stress that he is sensitive to psychic phenomena (Bagans and Crigger), his fellow investigators make no such claims but do use the device to contact spirits. Yet, the Ghost Box does not entirely represent a radio-based version of the dynamistograph and occlude the skills of mediums as the investigative team must interpret the voices that emanate from the Ghost Box, which is a crucial factor in the investigations to establish a connection between the voices and the details of the reported hauntings of sites. Furthermore, the Ghost Box is also sometimes used in conjunction with mediums, who “read” the locations and whose claims of contact inform questions addressed to spirits (who can answer using the Ghost Box), or present instances in which the Ghost Box can verify information provided by mediums (names, for example). Therefore, the Ghost Box is key to the investigations in this context, but ghost hunters can and do use it in closer conjunction with psychic mediums, as is the case in *Ghosts of Devil’s Perch*.

Paranormal Reality TV and the Ghost Box 2: *Ghosts of Devil’s Perch*

As Lisa Morton argues in *Calling the Spirits: A History of Seances*, the legacy of nineteenth century spiritualism led to the prevalence of both populist mediums (such as John Edward and James Van Praagh) and to a preponderance of “reality paranormal television shows and K-II meters” (Morton 269) in contemporary popular culture. This fusion of mediums, psychic and technological, is central to *Ghosts of Shepherdstown* (2016-2017), and represents, as does its follow-up series, *Ghosts of Devil’s Perch*, a radically different approach to paranormal Reality TV than that of *Ghost Adventures*. Based in Shepherdstown, dubbed ‘the most haunted town in America,’ in the wake of calls to emergency services reporting escalating accounts of paranormal activity, the Chief of Police, Mike King, assembles a group of paranormal investigators: Nick Groff (paranormal investigator), Bill Hartley (technical expert), and Elizabeth Saint (paranormal sensitive) to investigate the whole town and explain the hauntings, which they do, tracing them back to a historic tragedy and managing to “banish the demon” from the town. Given this success, officials from other haunted localities contacted King, such as Butte, Montana, where Sheriff Ed Lester and Mayor J.P. Gallagher also felt compelled to call on an investigative team to solve a spate of hauntings affecting the town. Thus, *Ghosts of Devil’s Perch* charts the activities of a new team: Dave Schrader, a paranormal investigator (who has also worked as a location researcher for *Ghost Adventures*), K.D. Stafford, a paranormal scientist who utilizes ghost hunting technologies, and Cindy Kaza, a psychic medium, who investigate the various hauntings occurring in Butte (a location also featured in season 13 of *Ghost Adventures*). However, while the ghost hunting element does have some similarities to *Ghost Adventures*, *Ghosts of Devil’s Perch* (like *Ghosts of Shepherdstown*) is significantly different is that it has a distinctive “story arc” that runs throughout the entire series, and which ultimately connects all the hauntings and supernatural activities that feature in each episode into a distinctive narrative. Moreover, the visual style is quite different to that of *Ghost Adventures*. For instance, episodes employ numerous aerial views of Butte to establish the location as a distinctive “character” and the action-oriented nature of the narrative sees the team called out to reports of paranormal sightings and experiences that are happening in

real time. Subsequently, while the series is technically characterized by rapid edits, eerie music, and the inclusion of recreations of the reports that includes representations of the ghosts as described by witnesses, coupled with Point-of-View shots of locations that further evokes horror film tropes (akin to *Ghost Adventures*), the series adds dramatic elements that also evoke trope of the crime and detective drama as the investigators are “following a trail” to solve an ultimate mystery, and not simply attempting to establish the authenticity of ghosts.

In this way, the approach of *Ghosts of Devil's Perch* is very different to *Ghost Adventures* as the series consistently fuses the figure and practices of the psychic medium with ghost hunting technology and, more fundamentally, is framed around a metanarrative: the dramatic tale of the supernatural “Shadow Man,” otherwise known as “The First,” a ghostly entity that seems to be consciously orchestrating the paranormal activities affecting Butte. Consequently, the show charts, episode-by-episode, how the team engage with a sudden surfeit of hauntings afflicting the community (from spectral presences and poltergeist activities to supernatural attacks) to discern what this ultimate spirit has planned for both the town and the investigative team. Significantly, it is a mystery the team solves in the final episode, with the revelation that the spirits engaged in the hauntings want to have their earthly lives remembered, and the series ends in a benign way as this wish is honored by town officials, reflecting the archetype of the ghost that cannot rest and that “must prevail upon the living to do something” (Ruffles 70). The principal theme of *Ghosts of Devil's Perch* is that Butte has become an uncanny environment in which residents increasingly report feelings of ‘estrangement’ from their homes and the town in the face of pervasive paranormal events. As such, Butte has become an unhomely place, one that reflects aspects of Freud’s concept of the uncanny in relation to the haunted house characterized as a “light space” that has been invaded and transformed into a “dark space” (Vidler 168) that instills in residents the feeling of “not-being-at-home” (Wigley 110). In the wake of such widespread reports of hauntings, the investigative team must, combining psychic skills with ghost-detecting technology, counter and restore equilibrium to the town.

Each episode sees the team responding to reports of supernatural sightings by residents leading to an investigation of haunted localities and homes. To establish an objective tone, Schrader engages with local historians and Butte’s archives to gain background information on locations and to discover the identities of spirits, and from this the show employs dramatic recreations of the past of haunted buildings to reflect both research and witness testimonies during the initial walkthrough of the locations. These elements (along with the recurrent “storyline”) give the series a distinctive sense of the blurring of genres that brings together docu-drama, ghost hunting, mystery-solving, and even action-adventure motifs (the climax in mining tunnels, for example), but set to a constant soundtrack that incorporates the tropes of horror that are prevalent in the paranormal reality TV genre (Lawrence). In terms of narrative structure, *Ghosts of Devil's Perch* differs markedly from *Ghost Adventures* as its investigative approach sees each member represent a particular role with a specific skillset. While *The Dead Files* combines readings of haunted locations by the medium Amy Allan subsequently investigated and independently verified by historic research

conducted by ex-police-detective, Steve DiSchiavi, *Ghosts of Devil's Perch* adds a critical technological perspective. As the psychic medium, Cindy Kaza (who has also featured on *The Dead Files* in 2023) visits the locations to establish a psychic connection with the spirit(s) reported to haunt them, reporting on the feelings she feels, and providing descriptions of the spirits who haunt the locations, in addition to "seeing" scenes from the past. Furthermore, *Ghosts of Devil's Perch* is not as technology reliant as *Ghost Adventures*, as Schrader consistently uses EVP recordings, while Stafford employs heat detection cameras and magnetic field detectors but is especially reliant on the multiple use of the Ghost Box in each episode to establish 'scientific' communication and contact with spirits in each location. In response to questions using the box concerning what happened to the entity in life, single words such as names or words like "killed" issue from the Ghost Box while Kaza engages in mediumistic techniques such as automatic writing and mirror scrying. In this way, the series consistently fuses media communication technology with traditional medium skills to provide two convergent channels of communication which serve to reinforce each other (names picked up by the Ghost Box and EVP recorder are the subject of Kaza's psychic readings). In this context, Stafford's use of the Ghost Box is an important part of the narrative as he specifically calls the device a "connection between the living and the world beyond" and explains that spirits engaging with the device can use "static" to form words, and so the device is used by the technician to "converse" with the spirit and pose questions to the entity/entities (all of which are audible to the audience and which, like *Ghost Adventures*, shows the words that are communicated through the Ghost Box as captions onscreen).

The fusion of traditional and modern spirit communication methods is central to *Ghosts of Devil's Perch* whereby Kaza's psychic communications (using traditional techniques such as spirit writing and spirit drawing) are used in concert with the application of the Ghost Box so that detected spirits can "speak" to the investigators, enhancing the veracity and the spectacle of the contact and the drama of the series. The Ghost Box, therefore, is an integral part of the investigative process in the series, through handheld boxes or sometimes amplified for group investigations and communication with the spirit(s). What is a significant factor in *Ghosts of Devil's Perch* is that Stafford takes the role of a counterpart to the mediumistic activities of Kaza, in that he uses the Ghost Box in her presence to reinforce the exactness of her contact and psychic sensing, effectively establishing a communicative team that detect and interpret communications from the dead using different channels. The result of this fusion further stresses the singularity of the series in that the skills of the medium and the use of radio-based technology are combined to enhance the evidence of the presence of spirits, and they play an important role in the over-arching supernatural detective story that is developed throughout the series. Indeed, an investigation of Butte's haunted courthouse sees contact made with spirits via the Ghost Box that directs the investigative team to the mining tunnels that run beneath the streets to encounter "The First" - the powerful spirit the team hold responsible for the various hauntings. As a result of messages conveyed through the Ghost Box directing the team to the mines, the identity of this spirit is revealed to be that of Michael Hickey, an investor who was bought out of a mine just prior to a lucrative copper discovery in the early twentieth century, and who initiates the hauntings as a means of being

remembered by the residents of the town. Accordingly, the Ghost Box, in combination with Kaza's spiritualist readings, is pivotal to the solution of the paranormal mystery that afflicts Butte.

Ghosts of Devil's Perch, therefore, effectively reflects a contemporary representation of the nineteenth century "interface between science and spiritualism" that saw platforms such as Morse Code and spiritual communication historically and culturally overlap (Owens). At the end of the series, Michael Hickey's motivations for the hauntings is conveyed through EVP, automatic writing, and the Ghost Box, and so both psychic and technological paranormal channels for communicating and receiving messages from the dead are used in tandem, representing the historic link between readings of the spiritual "ether" and wireless radio signals. Consequently, this fusion echoes the belief of early twentieth century spiritualists who stressed that "wireless telegraphy seemed to be analogous to and lend credibility to psychic forms of communication" (Enns 143), which is the essence of *Ghosts of Devil's Perch* and is the dynamic combination that ultimately closes the story arc of the series.

Mediums, Media, and the Specter of Radio

As the technology and media theorist Eric Kluitenberg argues in relation to the 'phantasmic' nature of early radio, Thomas A. Edison experimented with technology that could potentially enable the living to directly contact the afterlife, representing an example of "imaginary media," a machine that could communicate across the barrier between the living and the dead. With reference to EVP, Kluitenberg argues that this media-based approach to contact with the spirit world echoed Edison's experiments, but also illustrates the continued connections between media technology and mediumship that represent "an unholy union" (Kluitenberg 177). The prevalence of Edison-style communication media and their alliance with modern mediums stresses that this amalgamation has intensified regarding the success of paranormal reality TV, especially as detection and communicative technology (and the presence of mediums) is a key aspect of many ghost hunting shows. Nevertheless, the cultural historian Colin Dickey argues that a vital element in enhancing belief and the conviction that spiritual contact is possible by means of devices like the Ghost Box lies in their indeterminate nature, from the messages that emanate from the white noise of the scanned AM/FM radio spectrum, because:

All of this technology – both the custom and the repurposed – works along more or less the same principle: generating a lot of static and random effects, hoping to capture random noise and other ephemera. The ghost hunter, in turn, looks for patterns, momentary convergences, serendipity, meaningful coincidence. For the believers, this is where ghosts live: in static, in glitches, and in blurs (Dickey).

On the one hand, paranormal reality TV has increased the visibility of mediums (such as Chip Coffey, Cindy Kaza, and Chris Fleming in *Portals to Hell*, *Kindred Spirits*, *Help! My House is Haunted*, and *Spooked Scotland*). In this sense, the nineteenth century process of presenting the supernatural as an entertainment spectacle and source of spectatorship (Natale) has found modern expression in paranormal reality TV. But on the other hand, the Radio Voice Phenomenon of the Ghost Box represents a unique form of mediatization of aspects of the traditional role of psychic mediums. In the case of the use of the Ghost Box by television ghost hunters, they can use radio waves to enable them to make their own contacts with spirits, and so represents a novel instance of old and new media dynamically interacting (Jenkins). However, while this could be seen as an instance whereby one form of media appropriates the techniques of another and “attempts to rival or refashion them” (Bolter and Grusin 65), the Ghost Box still retains a clear connection with the techniques of the spiritualist medium, and so still reflects the nineteenth century conjunction between spiritualist practice and wireless technology as human interpretation is still an essential element in the use of the Ghost Box. In this regard, Bagans has stressed his enthusiasm for this technology as a favored ghost hunting tool in *Ghost Adventures* because it can not only indicate the presence of intelligent spirits, but also result in apparent actual dialogue:

At Hill View Manor, near Pittsburgh, I communicated with a spirit named Alicia. I was using the SB7 spirit box and asked, “What is your name?” She said, “Alicia.” Then she said, “Can I ask you a question?” I said yeah. She said, “Let us...hear.” I knew then that she wasn’t at rest because she wanted someone to hear her voice and feel her pain...To this day, this is one of the most special moments I’ve had during intelligent interaction with a spirit (Bagans and Crigger 255).

From this perspective, while the device represents a ‘techno-medium’ with televisual benefits (albeit often with the need for onscreen subtitles) for viewers to detect the words of the dead, it nevertheless retains an essential human element in that the interpretation of the communications by the team is a crucial factor. In some instances in *Ghost Adventures* mediums do play a role in investigations, and this is even more visually effective in *Ghosts of Devil’s Perch* as we see traditional medium skills and radio-based Ghost Box technology converge together to enhance the efficacy (and validity) of spiritual communication and the solving of a supernatural mystery that brings plenitude to both the spirits responsible for the hauntings and the people of town of Butte. This reflects communication and media scholar Paddy Scannell’s reading of Heidegger’s conception of radio as a network that induces a process of de-severance, representing a means of abolishing distance and making a world that is out of reach feel accessible to “anyone” (Scannell 167). Radio, in the context of the Ghost Box, does just this as it makes the spirit world accessible and (for those who give the device validity) blurs the distance between the worlds of the living and the dead. But again, the technology is reliant on human interpretation, as radio, with its abundance of voices, sounds and noises, is “a sonic universe of constant cacophony,

prone to misunderstandings” (Enns 25), evident in both *Ghost Adventures* and *Ghosts of Devil’s Perch*. This is an important critical issue with the Ghost Box because, as Dickey stresses, the words that are attributed to the dead may be simply based on interpretations of static or radio murmurs in the AM/FM wavebands, and no definitive scientific proof as to how spirits can interact with the world has been established (Biddle).

However, irrespective of the ultimate validity of the Ghost Box, paranormal reality TV represents a prime example of participatory media. This is because groups dedicated to ghost hunting using ITC technologies have become part of television media, while versions of TV technologies are readily available from online ghost hunting equipment retailers. Therefore, amateur ghost hunters and paranormal reality TV enthusiasts can obtain EVP recorders, REM Pods, and technologies such as the Ghost Box-like S Box Ghost Scanner, a handheld radio frequency sweep scanner and recorder that enables users to scan the AM/FM spectrum at differing speeds and available for online purchase from GhostStop.com or via Amazon.



Figure 1: S Box Ghost Scanner (owned by the author)

Image photographer: Jennine Wilson

While perhaps not as technologically sophisticated as the Ghost/Spirit Boxes used on *Ghost Adventures* or *Ghosts of Devil’s Perch*, a device like the S Box Ghost Scanner does adhere to the principle of using white radio noise as the platform to theoretically detect the voices of the dead and YouTube features demonstrations of the device by amateur ghost hunters in locations such as cemeteries. Alternatively, there are also a variety of ghost hunting apps that can be downloaded to iPhone and Android phones, including: Ghostcom Radar Spirit Detectors, iOvilus, the Ghost Detector Radar

Camera, and the Sono X10 Spirit Box, albeit with disclaimers that stress that the apps cannot *incontrovertibly* verify the presence of ghosts (Neal, Gagliano, and Steber). In this way, and inspired by paranormal reality TV shows (which also now use app-based communication devices, such as the Miracle Box app on *Spooked: Ireland*), ghost hunting has become a distinctive form of participatory media (Jenkins). As such, easily accessible ghost hunting technologies enable fans of supernatural reality TV to conduct their own investigations of haunted places with the ability to easily upload their ghost adventures to social media platforms such as YouTube and TikTok as examples of ‘spreadable media’ that are consumed in “niche communities” (Jenkins, Ford and Green 27). As Daniel Loxton, writing in *Skeptic Magazine* on the surge in paranormal investigations and media, argues, “ghost-hunting comprises an active subculture of thousands of amateur investigators, a popular media genre, [and] an industry of ghosthunting gadgets” (Loxton 57). Consequently, a wider set of individuals and groups can and do engage in and highlight their own instances of apparent EVP, and RVP contact with ghosts using such accessible examples of ghost hunting devices and apps akin to the attempts to contact ghosts as seen on reality TV.

Paranormal reality TV shows such as *Ghost Adventures* and *Ghosts of Devil’s Perch* (and a myriad of others) not only highlight the latest developments in technological Instrumental Transcommunication but unite them with the concept’s origins in nineteenth century spiritualism, with their roots in aligning the abilities of the medium with experiments “with electrical noise” (Enns 11). In this way paranormal reality TV demonstrates the continuities of paranormal readings of communicative technology and the continuation of mediumship and contacts with the dead as a source of public entertainment. Yet, while sensor-enabled robots such as the MiP (Mobile Inverted Pendulum) are evident on *Help! My House is Haunted* (“Ghost Hunters”), it is radio waves that remain the significant communicative factor wherein a plethora of television ghost hunters claim to have discovered spectral voices in the AM/FM spectrum. Consequently, Jeffrey Sconce’s observation that the “modern world’s most uncanny innovation: electronic media” (Sconce 209) has found both continuity in paranormal reality TV, which echoes the moment in the nineteenth century when technological progress “seemed to affirm the existence of spectral bodies” (Ackroyd 3), a factor evident in *Ghost Adventures* and *Ghosts of Devil’s Perch*. Therefore, modern “wireless” media technology not only forms a channel between the natural and paranormal worlds but represents a continuation of the historic merging of spiritualism and science. The key difference is that supernatural and radio communication technologies now merge in the platform of paranormal reality TV.

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