

Film Reviews – February 2012

Table of Contents

Ghostwatch & Interview with Stephen Volk

A review by Elizabeth Evans 2

Terraferma

A review by Lorenzo Mari. 17

Midnight in Paris

A review by Elliott Morsia 21

Ghostwatch - Interview with Stephen Volk

BBC One, 1992

A review by Elizabeth Evans, University of Nottingham, UK

Now on BBC One, *Screen One* presents an unusual and sometimes disturbing film marking Halloween. Over the centuries there have been countless reports of ghosts and ghouls but the line between fact and fiction has always been unclear. Using the modern idiom of the Outside Broadcast, Michael Parkinson, Sarah Greene, Mike Smith and Craig Charles star in *Ghostwatch*.

(BBC continuity announcer, 31st October 1992)

On Halloween 1992, BBC One aired a one-off ghost story from horror film writer Stephen Volk. The drama focused on a television crew investigating the case of single mother Pamela Early (Brid Brennan) and her two daughters Suzie (Michelle Wesson) and Kim (Cherise Wesson), whose house in north London had been possessed by the malevolent spirit of past owner, and paedophile, Raymond Tunstall, nicknamed 'Pipes' by the two girls. The action cuts between two locations. In a television broadcast studio, the programme's host (Michael Parkinson) discusses the case with psychologist Dr Lin Pascoe (Gillian Bevan) and a second presenter (Mike Smith). At the house, an on-site reporter (Sarah Greene) spends the evening with the family and a roving reporter (Craig Charles) interviews friends and neighbours. Slowly, the drama begins to call on classic ghost story tropes as flashes of a male figure are caught in both the house and the television studio. A shadowy figure appears behind Dr Pascoe; a disfigured man is glimpsed in a crowd; a man is seen standing by a window, but is gone when the camera pans back to look at him. Events within the house escalate as Suzie appears to become possessed, strange water marks appear, members of the film crew fall ill and, finally, Sarah Greene is dragged into the house's basement, Pipes attacks the television studio and Parkinson becomes possessed.

Although a scripted drama, *Ghostwatch* intentionally blurred fact and fiction. Within the programme's surrounding context and paratexts, its status as fiction is ambiguously alluded to. The programme was billed as part of the BBC's well-known *Screen One* series of one-off television scripted plays (1985-2002). A cast list appeared in the *Radio Times* and Brid Brennan was due to appear as the lead in a second BBC drama, *Tell-Tale Hearts*, the following evening. The continuity announcer (quoted

above) also makes guarded mention of the potential for things not quite being as they seem when he referred to the programme as a 'film' and stated that 'the line between fact and fiction has always been unclear'.

However, within the programme itself *Ghostwatch* is presented as a live, factual experiment, borrowing heavily from the aesthetics and form of various non-fiction genres. The main set is a multi-sectioned television studio with a central area where Parkinson interacts with other crew members and guests and a separate phone-in area with a bank of manned telephones awaiting calls from the public, echoing the sets of the BBC's real-life crime solving series *Crimewatch* (BBC One, 1984-), and a large screen linking to the outside broadcast segments. Despite being filmed in advance, an illusion of liveness is emphasised throughout. Very little happens for much of the first half of the programme, something that, as Volk describes below, was a crucial part of creating the impression that it was 'real'. Parkinson acts as an on-screen director, interrupting segments when something more important occurs elsewhere and marshalling the production's (and audience's) attention towards these 'unexpected' moments in the drama, alluding to the improvisational nature of live broadcasting. The technology and processes of production are visible throughout in a way generally seen in factual, but not fictional programming: much of the dialogue, including exposition-heavy monologues, is directed straight to camera; the camera man (Chris Miller) and sound operator (Mike Aiton) are introduced at the start of the episode and are frequently seen on-camera either directly or as shadows; and Sarah Greene is often seen holding her ear piece when getting instructions from either Parkinson or an off-screen production team. Even the title echoed numerous factual programmes that sought to observe various aspects of British life including *Crimewatch*, *Nature Watch* (Channel 4, 1981-1983), *Hospital Watch* (BBC One, 1991), and *Railwatch* (BBC One, 1989).

Casting was perhaps the most significant contributory factor to *Ghostwatch*'s allusions of reality. As Volk discusses below, central to his idea's success was a reliance on figures acting within 'natural' roles and Parkinson, Greene and Smith each carried particular connotations with them. Parkinson was a key figure of authority within British broadcasting, having hosted his eponymously-titled interview show since 1971; Sarah Greene was well-known for presenting Saturday morning children's programmes *Saturday Superstore* (BBC One, 1982-1987) and *Going Live* (BBC One, 1987-1993); Mike Smith was known not only as a radio and

Film Reviews

television presenter but also as Greene's husband. Craig Charles was the only star with more straight-forwarded fictional connotations, being most well-known as the star of BBC comedy series *Red Dwarf* (BBC Two/Dave, 1998-1999, 2009). Despite being fiction, then, the programme's key narrative conceit was its pretence of 'reality'.

The construction of *Ghostwatch* as 'fiction presented as fact' has made it one of the most controversial programmes in British television history, with many viewers believing the programme to be completely real. In an episode of BBC audience discussion programme *Bite Back* (tx BBC One, 15 November 1992), angry viewers lambasted the BBC for producing it, claiming that it had broken their trust with the Corporation. It was linked in the press to the suicide of a young man later that year, resulting in the Broadcasting Standards Commission censuring the BBC in 1995 (Culf, 1995: 8). Two years after its broadcast an article in the *British Medical Journal* cited the programme as having caused post traumatic stress disorder in two children (Simons and Silveira: 1994). The key factors in the programme's controversy related to the pretence that it was real, something that was seen as heightening the effect of its horror and apprehension, and the related presence of figures closely associated with authority (Parkinson) and factual children's television (Greene and Smith). In the *Bite Back* episode, producer Ruth Baumgarten and executive producer Richard Brook's defence of the programme relied on its framing as fiction, with Baumgarten saying that 'every possible way, short of having arrows in the programme was taken to tell the audience that this was drama'. However this defence did not, ultimately, hold and the BBC banned any future repeats, with the programme only becoming available again via a BFI DVD release in 2002.

In the following interview, as *Ghostwatch* approaches its twentieth anniversary, creator Stephen Volk looks back at his motivations for creating the programme, its production and the fallout. The interview demonstrates how disguising fiction as fact presents a number of challenges not just to writers and producers, but also to broadcasters in highlighting the crucial relationship between programmes and their paratexts. Whilst paratexts may play a key role in both the construction of media texts and the decision-making of audiences (see Bennett and Wollacott, 1987; Gray, 2010), *Ghostwatch* demonstrates that the programme remains the core of the televisual experience. Paratexts can be missed, hype can be ignored and although technologies such as the internet may have increased the reach of such paratextual information,

Ghostwatch highlights the potential consequences when not everyone engages with them.

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Interview with Stephen Volk

The following interview was conducted on Friday 28th October 2011, almost nineteen years to the day after *Ghostwatch's* first, and only, broadcast. The interview took place during the Mayhem Horror Festival at Broadway Cinema and Media Centre in Nottingham, where *Ghostwatch* was being screened with a writer Q&A.

Elizabeth Evans: Could you describe your motivation behind writing *Ghostwatch*?

Stephen Volk: First and foremost, I wanted to do a scary ghost story for television. I grew up with *A Ghost Story for Christmas* on the BBC [1971-1978], which were mostly M. R. James or Charles Dickens adaptations. I was particularly enamoured of Nigel Kneale's play *The Stone Tape* [BBC One, 1978], which made me realise that a genre piece on television can be intelligent and multi-layered. So those were my inspirations but really what was niggling me was 'How do you do a ghost story for television?' It occurred to me that in literature, when you read a ghost story, the most important thing to get across is: 'Please believe what I am about to tell you. I know you're not going to believe it, but it really did happen to me'. An awful lot goes into the suspension of disbelief in prose and it sounds simplistic but it suddenly occurred to me that the equivalent to that in television is documentary. In other words, sticking a camera in someone's

face and they say 'You'll never guess what happened to me...This really did happen to me.' So the idea of doing a ghost story that pretended to be a documentary was very exciting. I also liked the fact that it was the BBC and not some other channel. If you think back to stories like Edgar Allan Poe's, the kind of hoaxes he pulled off about balloons going to the moon or hypnosis stories, he would write them in such a way that they were mixed up in the context of non-fiction pieces in periodicals. So that idea -- of a story being in a medium that has a mixture of fiction and fact -- that was another reference point from literature.

So one motivation in writing *Ghostwatch* was to do a really good, modern ghost story that scared people but the other thing was that there was the opportunity to *satirise* television. I immediately saw satirical potential in the idea of what television would do if it took metaphysics, parapsychology, took a great philosophical question: 'What happens when we die?' What would television do with it? They would turn it into something *stupid*, you know? In some respects *Ghostwatch* was a critical analysis of TV through the prism of a ghost story and the reason I thought both those intentions worked together is that both of them are about belief. The ghost story operates on whether we believe what's going on. Do we reject what's going on? Is there a sense of doubt in the main character? The satire, or rather the critique of television, also works because who do we believe when we watch television? Do we believe what's going on? So the question of who do we trust, both whether we trust our eyes, our ears, whether we trust the experts, all that works in a ghost story but also works in a critique of the media.

EE: Does that relate to the importance of the BBC? During the fallout there were a lot of people saying 'I trust the BBC, this is not something the BBC should be doing'.

SV: I liked the idea of the badge of the BBC being at the beginning as the ultimate authority. If you look at the structure of *Ghostwatch* every single thing that gives us security is stripped away – family, God, Science. Horror films are about stripping all those senses of safety away and I was conscious of constructing it in that way. But the reaction, by and large, was quite peculiar because there was an in-built element of trust about the BBC brand, and that is what they felt angry about. Not about being scared but being hoodwinked. Look at Sue Lawley's *Bite Back* programme, I found it quite extraordinary that some of the audience said, 'It shouldn't be allowed, it was wrong of the BBC to do this!' And they would say almost in parenthesis, 'Oh, it was a good programme, don't get me wrong, *but it shouldn't be allowed!*' It was almost in the same

sentence. They would be saying, 'yes we can see the reason why you did this programme', but there was something about it being a BBC programme that made them angry.

EE: Do you think it would have worked very differently if it had been on another channel? Say Channel 4, which has that slightly edgier, quirkier reputation and remit.

SV: You wouldn't have got the subversion that you got on the BBC. I think you expect Channel 4 to be subversive and challenging and provocative in a way, that's part of its brand. So it is much better coming from the voice of authority, the kind of cosy 'Auntie', rather than the rather questionable uncle. I don't know if Channel 4 would have given us an easy ride, editorially, because along the way the BBC were twitchy with various things. Michael Parkinson said a few months ago, 'They were the ones that made it in the end', so I can't really badmouth them too much. They didn't have a Policy Department in those days, I mean I would never, today, have got this show through 'Policy'.

EE: Do you think the programme would work now?

SV: I think there has been so much water under the bridge in terms of mixing reality and fiction that you just wouldn't do it now. I think if you were doing it now, you wouldn't do it as drama, you would just do it as a reality show. You wouldn't bother with the conceit of doing it as a constructed drama. At the time it was done a number of things were happening. There were a lot of reality TV shows like 999 [BBC One, 1992-2003] that would have actors recreate the stories of real people who were trapped under a boat or something and would cut away to dramatisations of these people's near disasters. They would use music and conventional drama techniques in something we used to call documentary which we now call reality TV. On the other hand, in dramas like *NYPD Blue* [ABC, 1993-2005], you would very often get handheld cameras and the verisimilitude of cinema vérité to convey a documentary realism in a scripted drama show. This was all in the landscape at the time in televisual terms and we were thinking these rules were being broken across fact and fiction. Specifically, the producer [Ruth Baumgarten] always said that what made this project timely to her was when she saw CNN footage of the first Gulf war and the bombing of Bagdad had music played over it. So they were now putting music on newsreel! Which is a completely dramatic convention. And she thought, what are the rules now? What is the language of fiction against the language of

documentary? All these things were up for grabs. So that was part of what we wanted to comment on or dramatise.

EE: How did the project evolve over time?

SV: It was going to be a conventional filmed drama series about parapsychologists (or 'psychical-researchers' as we called them 20 years ago), being involved with a film crew. The film crew came across a haunted flat in a tower block. But it was a multi-stranded story that came together in the final episode which was a live broadcast from a haunted house, and Ruth tried to sell this to the BBC. Not unexpectedly they weren't prepared to commit to a six part series which was supernatural, they just wouldn't do that. But what Ruth said was 'how would it be if we tried to sell it as a 90 minute *Screen One*?' *Screen One* was the flagship slot, normally on a Sunday night, of individual films. Ours went out on a Saturday so it broke the rules a little bit. But she said, 'How would it work as 90 minutes?' and I thought shoe horning these six hours worth of material into 90 minutes would be ridiculous. I said 'Why don't we just do the last episode, which is the live broadcast from a haunted house and do it as if it is live and not as a conventional drama'. She was very keen on this idea. I very quickly realised that the writing of it was going to have certain problems because conventionally in screenwriting you hide exposition, you don't have people standing there telling you the story of their life. But of course reality TV and outside broadcast does exactly that. You see someone, you stick a camera in someone's face and you say 'What happened to you?' So it's very much question and answer, so all the things I don't normally do.

I had to reassess. I had to immerse myself and learn the style of outside broadcasting and studio-based programmes. I even ended up watching the Terry Wogan show [*Wogan*, BBC One, 1982-1992] just to get the rhythm of how people get interviewed, how experts get introduced, phone-ins, satellite link-ups that you sometimes see on the news. Obviously it's a very different kind of language and one that I became very excited by because it wasn't the conventional way of writing a ghost story. I had tremendous trouble convincing the execs of this. The Higher Echelons kept saying, 'You have to have scary things happening at the beginning.' But I said, 'Look, its pretending to be a live thing on Halloween night, you can't have something happening 10 minutes in. You have to feed in all the information really slowly. It's a 90 minute thing, nothing scary must happen until 45 minutes in'. Basically, I constructed it as for the first 45 minutes they're waiting patiently for something to happen, as they would if it were a real programme. And if it *were*, the

BBC would *know* that nothing is going to happen, they would set up all these things such as people telling their ghost stories, and then we'll hear from an expert, and then we will add lots of things while they're waiting, and surreptitiously, what I wanted to do in that first half was sneak in all these pieces of information that were going to pay off in the second half. So all the bits about the technology and the backstory of what happened to the children, they're all surreptitiously giving you information but nothing that has actually happened is scary yet. But that was a hard sell because I was really working with, not the producer herself, but other people higher up who were more used to conventionally constructed scripted drama, who had a problem with that kind of unconventional approach to it.

EE: So it wasn't about pretending to be fact?

SV: Don't get me wrong, that wasn't brushed over by any means. That was always there right until it got transmitted. The day before it aired, they threatened to pull it. One of the very first captions that comes up is very peculiar because it says, Michael Parkinson, Sarah Greene, Craig Charles, and then it says 'By Stephen Volk' as if I am one of the actors. The reason that got put on was because they demanded that Ruth put a caption on mentioning a writer at the beginning or it is not going to go out. So she hastily did it because the picture and sound had been locked and everything. Literally the night before, she had to put this caption on, which made no sense because she really didn't want to do it.

EE: It is quite interesting that you say that because one of the things that came up in the controversy around the programme was its framing. The *Radio Times* description and the Continuity Announcer uses phrases like 'Now on BBC 1, Screen One presents' try to frame it as drama-

SV: Well actually they tried to cover themselves by saying they are blurring the line between fact and fiction. I always use the analogy – the worst bore in the world is someone who tells you the punch line first and then proceeds to tell you the long, laborious joke. And that's what the BBC really wanted to do because the one thing the BBC hates is attention. Their lives are fine as long as nothing rocks the boat and that's basically the attitude of an institution, I am sure. I am sure that introductory announcement was composed carefully; they could have been a lot worse, they could have completely ruined it, it is vague enough. You know the *Radio Times* had the cast list and I kind of buried my head in my hands when I saw that and I thought 'That's completely blown it'.

Film Reviews

But what we were actually quite angry about is the reverse of that, which is at the end. We thought once you have told your 'gag' (not that I was frivolous in this, it's a drama that is satirical but it is meant to scare you and disturb you and be provocative) then you come clean, then we can discuss the gag. Therefore at the end we thought it would have been perfectly valid for the continuity announcement to say something like, 'well you know what you can expect on Halloween, I am sorry if anyone was disturbed.' In fact we suggested they could have a programme discussing what they had just seen so everyone feels safe and feels better. But apparently the person who was on the continuity that night was doing their job for the first time and they didn't know what the programme was. Somebody really messed up in not briefing them and *Ghostwatch* just finished and the cast list came up, and Parkinson is possessed. It all ends in chaos and then it goes to the continuity announcer who says 'And now...*Match Of the Day*'. And that really contributed to the weirdness of the whole evening. I am not saying that everyone would have stayed or that it would have negated the response to it, but I think it would have helped cover people's BBC arses to be perfectly honest. If they had something like that it would have been sensible and fine by us.

EE: And that lack also doesn't fit in terms of the horror genre either, because you don't have that moment at the end when the lights come up and you realise that you're safe.

SV: Many people told me they didn't see the beginning, they missed the announcer, they didn't see the *Radio Times* so they missed that, they got scared so they didn't watch the end. So people didn't necessarily watch from minute one to minute 90, that's the nature of television. But that was also what was appealing about it in 'horror' terms. That it wasn't something you had to pay £5 to go to the multiplex to see, go in, this is the whole thing, this is the end, etc. It was something that was piped into your home (Pipes was the name of the ghost, remember!). And that is another dimension unique to television: you are *already* safe in your home. Something is happening to you *in your home*. You haven't left to go to the cinema, get scared and then come home safe, you *are* safe. And that is what really appealed to me about television being a place where you could get scared because I think a lot of horror that has been on TV, like ghost stories of M. R. James, are kind of cosy. They are normally done in period settings, there are quite few contemporary ones.

EE: What was the BBC's role in the evolution of the programme and where they did say 'no, that is a bit too much'?

SV: Well like I said, I don't work for the BBC, so I can't lose my job but people within the BBC *can* lose their job, so they were saying things like, 'Can we just use actors? Pretend that they are reporters?' That was an *enormous* battle. It seems to me, you ask any person in the street, you know ask 200 people and I guarantee 199 would know that if you were going to do that at all, you have to do it with people that are believable otherwise just don't do it!

EE: I did want to ask about the casting in that not only did you have people that were known as presenters, but you had people known as a particular kind of presenter. You had Michael Parkinson, who is the granddaddy of interviewers, and you had Sarah Greene, who had particular associations with her position on *Going Live*. How important was it to get those particular figures involved rather than just somebody who was known as a presenter but not specifically with those connotations?

SV: I don't know who it had gone to and who turned it down. I don't think anyone other than Parkinson was consulted for that part. I would write 'Presenter', 'Reporter', 'Phone-in Presenter', 'Comedian'. Then I got a bit bored with that so I would write, for instance, Anneka Rice as the roving report because she was rushing around in *Treasure Hunt* [Channel4, 1982-1989], and I would say David Dimbleby as the anchorman or I would say Nick Ross. They wouldn't let Nick Ross do it because he was still doing *Crimewatch* at that stage. But I started to put in these real names, for fun almost. The idea of Mike Smith and Sarah Greene- what happened there was that the script was given to her and he happened to read it, because obviously they were a couple, and he wanted to be in it. So the producer rang me and said 'how would it be if they were both in it?' And it just seemed to be a really obvious thing to do- have one half of a couple in the studio and have the other in the haunted house.

EE: I think again it just adds another layer to the blurring of fact and fiction.

SV: The thing in the story already, I think, which comes across the more times I see it, is that television people become a kind of surrogate family to children. The idea of the actual family being spilt up. Somebody once said, going back to *NYPD Blue*, I think it was David Milch said, that 'Television is always about a family. It can be a family of cops that all work together, but it's always about families, it might not be about an actual family'. And that made me realise that *Ghostwatch*, in a way, is about a family. If this is this traumatized, fragmented family then this

other family comes in to look after them and then the family gets broken apart, which is often what horror films are about, breaking up families. In fact that is what *The Shining* [dir. Stanley Kubrick, 1980] is all about, the disintegration of the American family. That idea that we added to the mix a real life 'celebrity' couple whom people at home think of as part of *their own* family kind of added to that.

EE: Sarah Greene becomes very maternal, she looks after the older girl when she starts getting stomach aches and she does become the figure that she would have been known as to children, as she was the maternal friendly one on *Going Live* every Saturday morning.

SV: I think that was in the script, but it came across from the way she wanted to play it as well as what came naturally in the situation. I was also interested in poltergeist cases where in some instances I read about the scientists literally move in to study the kids. I thought what is that like? Having someone move in with your family and they stay there for weeks or months and they are expecting to see something, so the pressure is on the kids to come up with something. So I was thinking a lot about the psychodynamics in those actual cases like the Enfield poltergeist case in the late 1970s, whilst at the same time scripting this satire. But funnily enough you start being interested in one aspect of it – the ghost story part of it or the parapsychology part of it - but it tended to work for the other side of it, which was the media satire and the metaphor of the family. So in that respect, the more work you put in, the more dividends were paid back.

EE: What was your perspective on the fallout from the broadcast and the subsequent banning?

SV: I tell you what I found disappointing was, first of all, the fact that it was anger at the BBC because I thought they could have avoided that. Maybe I am wrong, maybe they couldn't have avoided it, but I think they didn't know what they were dealing with. They should have anticipated what to do; they should have had a stand point. The anger was surprising, I just thought people would like it or not like it, find it scary or not find it scary. I thought people would watch it and think 'oh what's this? This doesn't look like a Halloween thing' and then they would think after 10 minutes, 'Oh I get it, alright I will watch this then'. That was honestly what I thought. I didn't think that some people wouldn't get it at all and switch off or some people would believe it right to the end. We didn't anticipate that at all. In fact we worked on it *as if* people 'got it'

within the first few minutes: we had to. Still, there was a huge level of anger at the trust of the BBC being breached, but what I was disappointed by was that I think there was only one review that actually talked about it as a piece of *drama*, or discussed or even contemplated, in any in-depth way, why did someone write this as a piece of drama? The rest was all controversy or people saying it was rubbish and nobody saying, 'Hang on, somebody has written this as a *Screen One* for a reason.'

We had to wait almost 10 years later for the BFI DVD to come out. I think quite a few people saw it as kids and now that they had grown up wanted to see it again, or see the end if they had switched off early. I have had much more feedback since 2002 and it has steadily grown with the internet and that kind of thing and it becomes a discussion. People have said '*Ghostwatch* scared the bejesus out of me, but I really thought it was fantastic'. The idea that someone can be really, really scared, but also think it was a good programme that would never occur to the BBC; they would just simplistically think that something scary could not be pleasurable. Because nobody there understands the genre in the slightest, to this day.

EE: It seems like there was a lot of parental anger in the controversy.

SV: That was my feeling, that kids weren't really disturbed by it anymore than, say, seeing a horror film that frightens you but that you think is great because it's thrilling and transports you into the realm of the imagination. That's what I grew up on. I think there is something more here psychologically that I would dearly like to get to the bottom of. Children were able to not have a problem with blurring fact and fiction whereas the adults felt they were being made a mug of because they were believing something and then were being told it's not true. And that massively undermined something in them and that they had to complain about. Maybe children have a freer idea of what is fact and fiction.

EE: Or don't have lost pride over being duped.

SV: Yes! Absolutely.

EE: There was possibly an 'I should have known' thing going on that a kid is not going to care about.

SV: Look, I can only say this: it was never my intention to make people look stupid at all; it never entered my mind that would be a result of it or how some people saw it. It is very reassuring for me since the BFI re-

release came out and the producer, director and I got to do the audio commentary, which we always wanted to do. We wanted to explain why we did it, because we felt there was an opportunity missed when the thing went out. So finally we were able to do that. Also it was a tremendous vote of confidence that the BFI released *Ghostwatch* under their Archive Television banner as a 'TV Classic': that felt really good.

EE: Looking back on the fallout do you wish you had done anything differently or, if you were doing it again, would there be anything that you would change?

SV: I wanted to have it much scarier at the end, I must admit. But there was a feeling by Lesley [Manning, director] and Ruth that they were happy with it more clearly fictitious at the end and it going a bit big and mad. So people would know, 'we're safe, I realise now what it is.' I personally would have avoided doing that. For instance, there is a time jump, when it goes to blackness in the studio and then Parkinson speaks and I didn't think that fitted formally with the rest of the programme. What I would have really liked to have done in the end, and they really wouldn't let me do this, is that I wanted the sense that the ghost was coming from the studio to you and your TV... that it was now in your TV in your house and then leave it at that. Cut to blank, no end credits.

I wanted to do a dog whistle sound that no one would hear but all the dogs would go crazy! Onscreen, Mike Smith would say, 'Pet dogs are going crazy up and down the country!' But Richard Brooke, the executive producer, remembers me suggesting that and saying 'No way!' He's absolutely right, it would have been totally irresponsible, but it would have been fun!

EE: On the more positive fallout side, where do you see the legacy of *Ghostwatch*?

SV: I quite often meet TV producers now that remember it, and the first thing they say or the first reason why I get the meeting is because they saw it when they were 12 or whatever. Another thing that happens is that time is quite kind to it. In other words, people forgive it more for being 20 years old than if it had been 5 years old because it was slightly dated at the time, to be honest that was my perspective.

I have seen it so many times as you can imagine, but I like watching it with an audience because that is a very curious experience. The first thing I do when I introduce it is I always ask how many people have seen it before and usually it's about 50% and that's quite a good mix. I say first of all that it is meant for a small screen, which means that when you see

it on a big screen, the captions are going to look very big. And you are going to see things in the frame like the reflection of Pipes in the French windows and its going to be really obvious whereas on a TV screen its almost 'did I see that?' And I just tell them to put themselves back. I say, 'I know you are watching this on a big screen, but please just think you are watching TV you don't know what it is on a Saturday night in 1992'. And I hope they are able to do that. What usually happens is that they get giggly and tittery at the beginning because they think its funny and crass and crappy, but there is a funny thing that happens about half way in where they start to go quiet, they start to get involved in it. It's usually a bunch of smarmy students sitting there thinking this is not going to be scary. I don't think it is anything to do with the writing but at a certain point you just start to feel, even though you know what it is, you start to feel slightly disturbed by it. And I think it is something to do with the fact that the language of the live broadcast seems to overrule all your instincts. Nowadays you know it is fake, but it starts to work on you in some indefinable way and starts to get under peoples skin even though they can tell themselves all manner of reasons to reject it.

All the stuff about *Most Haunted* [Living TV/Sky Living, 2002-] is quite interesting. Ciarán O'Keeffe, the parapsychologist guy who worked on *Most Haunted* gave an interesting talk at Bath [at the Association for the Scientific Study of Anomalous Phenomena Conference 2011] where he did a summation of paranormal TV, not drama but the so-called paranormal in so-called reality TV. He was quite specific in saying that the imagery of *Most Haunted* did pick up on *Ghostwatch*. It's even got the blonde investigator and he saw a very straight line from it. I would like to pretend that I hadn't spawned something so awful but a lot of people ask me 'Do you feel you were the progenitor of *Most Haunted*?' I have to say I think it is almost the exact opposite of what I was doing, because I was doing something provocative, as a piece of drama that was meant to ask questions. Whereas *Most Haunted* doesn't contemplate asking you any questions, it's delivering you a spurious, deluded, cod-spiritualist view of the world that you are supposed to just accept as entertainment which couldn't be further from what I wanted to do.

EE: *Most Haunted* is *Ghostwatch* without the knowing irony, which kind of makes *Ghostwatch* what it is.

SV: It is the nature of drama versus reality television, or documentary if you like. When you watch [reality television] you are excited by it, and even I succumb to watching some of these things. I get quite worked up

Film Reviews

by who is going to win *The Apprentice* [BBC One 2005-], she's an nice person, she's horrible, he isn't, I like him, whatever- but once it is over, the next day or even half an hour later, I think I couldn't be bothered by that now, I've forgotten! Whereas if you see a really good drama that involves you, you can remember that for the rest of your life and it will have meaning forever because it resonates. And I think there is a world of difference. What I said about it making people think and it being provocative: 'I thought one thing and now I think another'. You know, that is the lovely thing about stories: you lead someone along when they think it is going to be one thing and it becomes something else. Sometimes you go on this scary journey of discovery too, as the writer. Scary – but good.

Terraferma

Dir: Emanuele Crialese, Italy, 2011.

A review by Lorenzo Mari, University of Bologna, Italy.

A large number of the Italian films screened at the 68th Venice International Film Festival (2011) such as *Là-bas* by Guido Lombardi, *Terraferma* by Emanuele Crialese, *Io sono Li* by Andrea Segre and *L'ultimo terrestre* by Gian Alfonso Pacinotti, dealt with issues relating to the current migration flow in Italy. In response, the French journalists Jacques Mandelbaum and Philippe Ridet wrote an article for *Le Monde* (Mandelbaum and Ridet, 2011) underlining the existence of a link between this particular trend in Italian cinema and a cultural and political "obsession with migrants". Clearly detectable in recent Italian cultural debates, they concluded that a paranoid attitude towards migration is helping to create "almost a genre" in new Italian cinema. This polemical argument was picked up by some Italian newspapers and film magazines, raising some important issues about these films, in particular their tendency to deconstruct dominant narratives by representing alternative stories about immigrants. For example, *Là-bas* gives a new and fresh documentary-like account of the 2008 riots in Castelvolturno near Naples which were ignited by immigrants protesting against their working conditions; *Io Sono Li* highlights the widespread prejudice against Chinese migration to Northern Italy; *L'ultimo terrestre* uses the metaphor of extra-terrestrial aliens to talk about the distorted feelings existing in Italian society about the presence of "otherness".

However, this orientation does not seem enough to create, in the words of Mandelbaum and Ridet, "almost a genre". Each of these films shows its own stylistic, thematic and political specificity, refusing the generic classification proposed by the French press. Emanuele Crialese's *Terraferma* (2011), for instance, is not a film about migration or a "minority film" in the strictest sense: Crialese engages in a diverse type of artistic research, refining his usual poetics and positing his film in a particular cultural and artistic tradition. On the one hand, the Italian director manages to reaffirm a stylistic coherence seen in his three previous films, slightly deviating from the predominance of the oneiric imagery in *Nuovomondo* (2006), but without committing himself to a full "turn to realism". On the other hand, the Italian director confirms his preference for choral grass roots narratives, especially for those which can be interwoven with a national or international canon, modifying it from below (in the wake of the Italian Neorealist tradition, for instance).

This potential can be focused through a description of the narrative scheme of the film and its ideological functions. In essence, the plot

Film Reviews

revolves around the story of a family caught up in the economic change of an unnamed Sicilian island, which is gradually shifting from a predominance of sea-fishing to tourism. The economic struggle of this family is further complicated by the arrival of African immigrants to the island and, shortly afterwards, to their house. The decision of the patriarch of the family, Ernesto (Mimmo Cuticchio) and of his grandson Filippo (Filippo Pucillo) to give shelter to an Ethiopian pregnant woman and to her daughter, who have saved themselves from a shipwreck off the coasts of the island, is clearly in contrast with the Italian current legislation about "illegal" migrants. This voluntary resistance to a racist law is going to disrupt the lives of all the members of the family – from a social, political, economic, ethical and even psychical point of view.

Any of the individual actions of the characters can be linked with the representation of the small, traditional community living on the island, which acquires, then, the status of a real character within the movie. The community is directly acting in some choral scenes, which directly recall the closing sequences of *Nuovomondo* (the Italian migrants to the United States emerge from a milky sea) and *Respiro* (the islanders follow the central male character, who is going to drown, into the water), though with a more realist treatment.

To be more precise, *Terraferma* shares with *Nuovomondo* (2006) and *Respiro* (2002) the idea of a chorality which is made impossible by contingent events and, thus, reduced to a dream-like or, in the case of *Terraferma*, to a "not fully realist" image. This sense of a fragile chorality, continuously hindered by social and political changes, is visible at its best in a sequence which is not one of the main turning points of the plot, but is, however, very important, at least from a symbolic, cultural and political perspective. It takes place when all the fishermen of the island have a briefing in one of the squares of the village. There, they all agree with Ernesto that the maritime law, which compels fishermen (and boat crews in general) to assist any other boat or ship which is in distress, should prevail over the Italian contingent laws, which authorise the forcing back of immigrants into international waters. Afterwards, these fishermen decide to organize a protest dumping all the fish they have caught during the night in front of the local police station, the symbol of the centralised, authoritarian, unshared power that they are contesting.

This scene shows something different from the mere supplementation of the "problem" of immigration on the difficult daily life and labour of small, traditional communities. The superimposition of themes would implicitly confirm the xenophobic appraisal of migration, which reduces it to be only a threat for the social cohesion and the economic possibilities of an already unstable, either local or national, community. Such an attitude is avoided precisely through the emergence of a choral agency, which allows the audience to notice that the central authority, and its political ideology,

is not only struggling to stop the migration flow, but is also working actively against the spontaneous intercultural links between migrant and native traditional cultures, which share the same focus on the protection of human dignity.

This awareness of the intercultural links rising from below posits Crialese's film in a new and interesting place in the Italian canon. *Terraferma*, like the previous *Malavoglia* (2010) by Pasquale Scimeca, seems to be influenced by the 1881 masterpiece by Giovanni Verga *I Malavoglia*, but here Crialese is much nearer, from a political and thematic point of view, to the Neorealist narration of Luchino Visconti's *La terra trema* (1948), which is one of the first cinematic translations of Verga's novel, than to Verga himself. In a re-proposal of the Neorealist cultural and political legacy, he abandons any neorealist or "extremely realist" style in favour of a "nearly-realist" compromise, which manages to show both Crialese's acquaintance and his critical distance from his famous predecessors.

Furthermore, Crialese's thematic and political choices seem to go also in the direction of Pasolini's work on the demise of Italian rural culture, sketched in one of Pasolini's most famous articles, *The Fireflies* (1975). Pasolini used the allegory of the "disappearance of fireflies" to show his elegiac awareness of the fact that Italian traditional culture and sense of community were being pushed aside by the growing importance of industrialization and media society (Pasolini, 1975: 131). Crialese looks for a way for Italian traditional communities and culture to escape the elegy (and the death) contained in Pasolini's words, as the importance of customary laws and traditional human knowledge of nature still have a grasp on today's political situation (which is in fact superimposed with violence on the historical weakness of other, older experiences), thus showing the legitimacy of a cultural and political resistance.

However, Crialese's point of view is not completely positive, and the closing images are there to confirm this impression, as the audience does not know whether Filippo is going to save the two immigrants, mother and son, by bringing them to Sicily. Their ship is lost in open water, being shot from above until the image becomes frozen. This image is very similar to those of the boats of immigrants, which always seem about to be lost in the Mediterranean Sea. Native Italians and African immigrants, thus, share the same uncertainty, because they are struggling against the same powers and with the same precarious means, such as, for instance, small and fragile crafts facing the open sea.

This political background makes *Terraferma* very different from the other Italian films in competition at the Venice Film Festival, and maybe also from most of the other Italian films on migration produced and directed until now. Paradoxically, it is not its sociological focus, but the ironic links

Film Reviews

with the Italian literary and film canons which manage to avoid the self-ghettoization of this film within a contingent "genre".

Most of all, these connections manage to re-open some important questions about the political and cultural situation of Italy, going back, through Visconti, to the times of Verga (as for the presence/absence of a choral agency on life and political action of the proletarian masses) and, more consistently, of Pasolini (for the still-productive clash between a dying tradition and an awful, fascist-like modernization). Evidently, this is an engagement with a larger Italian cultural and artistic tradition which cannot be simply reduced to a recent, purely counter-ideological, self-absolving and do-gooding "obsession", or to a "genre", whose hypothesized existence is based only on a vaguely described common ideological stance.

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Midnight in Paris

Dir: Woody Allen, USA, 2011

A review by Elliott Morsia, Queen Mary, University of London, UK

As the title suggests, Paris provides the framework for Woody Allen's latest film, the events of which flit between the contemporary city and the renowned cultural epoch of the 1920s. The film's opening montage, accompanied by the idyllic 'Si tu vois ma mère' by jazz saxophonist Sidney Bechet, runs through a series of shots portraying iconic Parisian avenues and architecture. Following the course of a day the scene moves from a bright and promising morning through a warm afternoon, before rupturing suddenly into a rainy, turbulent evening, which ultimately resolves itself into a cool dry night. Though this scene carries its own aesthetic pleasure, we might question whether the director is setting a more subversive tone here. Rather than just frame the city and mark the passage of time (toward midnight), does the juxtaposition of the tranquil music with this unexpected turn of events take on symbolic significance considering the contingencies of the narrative? The intrusion of rain, which visibly disturbs the city-dwellers (and might also impinge upon the audience's aesthetic contemplation), may suggest an element of illusion underlying the narrative of social life.

Topographically and socially the modern metropolis has, since its conception, functioned as a symbol of humanity and communal life, to be examined and deciphered by various thinkers. Regarding Woody Allen, Manhattan has been ubiquitous in a great number of his films. It was captured iconically towards the end of the 1970s in *Annie Hall* (1977) and *Manhattan* (1979), a period commonly regarded as the high-point in the filmmaker's long and industrious career. This was, however, a period where Allen's incisive and dialogical psyche was etched directly into his portraits of the city (he was intimately attached to Manhattan). During the 1980s, as Allen himself shifted from lead to supporting acting roles, his films began to develop into slower and more subtle works, particularly *Hannah and her Sisters* (1986) and *Crimes and Misdemeanours* (1989). Completing this transition more recently, Allen has stepped away from acting and embraced a more reflexive, directorial stance toward his films. Strong products of this method in the last decade include *Melinda and Melinda* (2004), *Match Point* (2005), *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* (2008) and *You Will Meet a Tall Dark Stranger* (2010).

As the filmmaker has become more reflexive, in the sense that he conveys a less directly expressional manner – compare the Woody Allen of recent interviews, such as those conducted last year to promote *Tall Dark Stranger*, with the enigmatic and eccentric figure of the 60s and 70s – he has also finally relinquished his grip upon Manhattan. Fresh *impersonal* cities have provided the frame for Allen, and it is fitting therefore that *Midnight in Paris* is dominated by iconic US expats. As with the portrayal of London in recent films *Match Point* and *Tall Dark Stranger*, Paris is viewed from an outsider's perspective: Owen Wilson's quaint character Gil walks the back-alleys, and in the opening scene we don't see the Eiffel Tower through the popular eye as in a picture-book or postcard, but through a lens stationed in an unfamiliar side-street.

In line with his recent films, the theme and role of illusion is central to *Midnight in Paris*. In response to Gil's extolling of the "Golden Age", the pedantic yet sinister character Paul (Michael Sheen) asserts that "nostalgia is denial", and levels the following accusation at Gil: "you're in love with a fantasy".

This accusation could be interpreted in numerous ways, both within and outside the film itself. On an overt level (with for example the role of 1920s Paris), it is illusion that provides the premise and drive for the narrative. Gil, a successful Hollywood hack whose grander artistic ambitions have set his heart out of joint, has recently begun work on a novel. The content of this fictional work emphasizes his own nostalgic temperament, with the fictional protagonist running a "nostalgia-shop" selling bric-a-brac – a fact worth bearing in mind when we consider the film's denouement. Gil, struggling to complete this work – in a similar quandary to the protagonist of Alexander Payne's *Sideways* (2004) – is clearly not at peace with his pecuniary-orientated working and family lives, and for these reasons he goes in search of some aesthetic solace, away from the bluster of Hollywood.

If we consider the events of the film (Gil receives counsel from Ernest Hemmingway and Gertrude Stein), and the calm with which he eventually breaks off his engagement, Gil appears to work through an internal, illusion-orientated crisis. Later in the film he will suggest to a young Luis Buñuel the plot of his surrealist masterpiece *The Exterminating Angel* (1962). Unlike Buñuel who (as emphasised by Jean-Claude Carrière) refused to be drawn on the potential "intellectual" connotations of his films, Gil describes how generic bourgeois dinner guests, when unable to

leave the *social* contract of a dinner date, must bear out each other's *personal* company, and by doing so reveal the hollow centre to a money-orientated class. Regardless of its legitimacy, as it perhaps overlooks the more fundamental, subversive nature of Buñuel's film, this description provides clear insight into Gil's stifled and disparaging state of mind.

The narrative begins with Gil's arrival in Paris, where he is staying in the plush Hotel Le Bristol with his luxurious yet domineering, and disturbingly philistine fiancée Inez (Rachel McAdams). Gil frequently describes Paris as his ideal artistic and imaginative sanctuary. With this in mind he baulks at a dancing date with Inez's friends Paul and Carol, and instead undertakes a nocturnal stroll in search of inspiration. Losing himself at the corner of an obscure inclining road, he takes a seat on some stone steps. At this point a sonorous bell chimes midnight and an antique car emerges up the road. From within this literal/narrative vehicle, and over a number of nights, some of Gil's (and presumably Allen's) artistic idols emerge, from the novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald to the poet T. S. Eliot. Gil hops inside and enters *L'Age d'Or*: Paris in the 1920s. This is a place and time for which Gil has continually expressed his admiration and desire both to his adulterous fiancée and her friends; a dream-world, or a phantasmagoria.

For both "mainstream" and "intellectual" audiences, this sequence, which becomes the film's hinging motif, serves a few purposes. Ostensibly Cinderellaesque, it is through this device that the film can be seen to provide some light comedy. The mainstream audience might feel inclined to wink and nudge when the bell chimes toward midnight, and laugh outright at Gil's bemused expression when he finds himself lodged at a jazz-swing party between the Fitzgeralds and Cole Porter. Similarly the many cultural allusions may well satisfy the intellectual audience. Through this device the film parodies a lengthy, though by no means comprehensive, list of transatlantic and European greats from the Modernist and cultural folklores of the 20s: Cole Porter, the Fitzgeralds, Ernest Hemmingway, Gertrude Stein, Djuna Barnes, T.S. Eliot, Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Edgar Degas, Paul Gauguin, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Man Ray, Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí. Either way the motif, emphasised by the film's trailer, pits a contemporary protagonist against a set of highly renowned cultural figures from the 1920s in ways that appeal to different audience sensibilities at once.

Film Reviews

In a similar manner the poster to *Midnight in Paris* shows Owen Wilson strolling thoughtfully beside the Seine, whilst the scene beyond and above him fugues into Van Gogh's *Starry Night*. This poster also symbolizes the function of illusion within the structure of the narrative, driving both Gil and the action in unison. A pattern of illusion spreads, and can be applied to every significant character. It is for example Inez's illusion as to the "greatness" of her friend and "wise academic" Paul, which leads her to cuckold her husband by sleeping with him, and her mother Helen's illusion of monetary "value" which leads her to repeat the refrain "cheap is cheap" (and to justify the 18,000 Euros price tag for an antique/very old chair of no cultural significance). Crucially though, in a reflexively ironic manner reminiscent of actual Modernist texts, it is the "illusory" characters in the film (by which I mean the characters from the *L'Age d'Or* and the *Belle Epoch*) which take Gil not just on his horizontal journey across Paris, but also his vertical journey through the self. And it is as a result of this exploration that Gil is able to turn his novel in a progressive direction and, ultimately, acknowledge and dissolve his illusions – including Inez.

As discussed, the theme of illusion is handled for both comedic and serious reasons, and we should bear this in mind before bookmarking the film a mere romantic comedy. We can for example view Gil as an Everyman, in whose shoes we can turn the critical eye inward or perhaps upon social narrative in general. Schopenhauer believed it is human nature to form illusory desires, which once attained, provide no respite as we immediately pursue another. A century later Freud argued in *Mass Psychology and Analysis of the 'I'* that the masses demand illusions and cannot do without them. Though such views may appear overly cynical, with recent film advertisements impelling the public to ask "was Shakespeare a Fraud?", their presence remains important.

Music is an important feature in Woody Allen's films, who is himself a practicing jazz musician. Unlike the fairytale motif, the music has less control over the narrative in *Midnight in Paris*, and can therefore be enjoyed as a circumstantial accompaniment. It takes on greater significance though if we consider the film's place within Allen's oeuvre as a whole. I have alluded to the 1920s jazz which opens the film (Bechet actually travelled to Paris in the 20s, with Josephine Baker, whose jaunty 'La Conga Bilcoti' also features) and this is a genre which very much fits into the larger scheme of things for Allen. The soundtrack to *Manhattan* is itself heavily laden with 20s jazz, and the musical biopic *Sweet and Lowdown* (1999), which takes its name from a piece which features in *Manhattan*, actually portrays the life of a fictional jazz guitarist from the

1930s, Emmett Ray (Sean Penn). Emmett is obsessed with real jazz legend “Django” Reinhardt, innovator of Gypsy Jazz, and it is a contemporary composer and performer of Gypsy Jazz, Stephane Wrembel (who composed the soundtrack for *Vicky Cristina Barcelona*) whose gypsy waltz ‘Bistro Fada’ recurs throughout *Midnight in Paris*.

The relationships in these earlier films also bear a close analogy to *Midnight in Paris*. Emmett and Hattie (Samantha Morton) in *Sweet and Lowdown* can be likened to Isaac (Allen) and Tracy (Mariel Hemingway) in *Manhattan*. Both female characters are diffident, and loving, and exude a sense of innocence, whilst both male protagonists struggle to admit (to themselves first and foremost) their true feelings for them. If we now cast our minds to the final scenes of *Midnight in Paris*, the incipient romance between Gil and Gabrielle (Léa Seydoux) is also comparable to these earlier pairs. Like Gil, Isaac is struggling to formulate a novel in *Manhattan*, and Emmett as mentioned, struggles to deal with his musical gift in comparison to Django Reinhardt. Like Isaac, Gil’s head and heart are torn for much of the film between differing forms of illusory beauty: the golden-haired Inez and the lustrous Adriana (Marion Cotillard).

In a similar manner to which the film began, the characters in the final scene depart into the anonymity of the city. Having alluded to the seeds of romance between Gil and Gabrielle in this scene, let’s reconsider the opening montage. In relation to the film as a whole, the turbulent burst of rain which intrudes halfway through could be deemed symbolic of the purging or washing away of Gil’s illusions, which appears to have been achieved following the events of the narrative: having used Stein’s analysis, Gil is able to direct his novel in a progressive direction, and having learnt from the stubborn stasis of Adriana, he parts from the constrictive and unfaithful Inez. In spite of this, however, as he departs with Gabrielle, through the Parisian rain which he has poeticised throughout the film, has Gil allowed another illusive romance to cloud his judgement? Perhaps the attractive yet sober presence of the museum guide (Carla Bruni), who insightfully censures the deceptive character Paul, would have been the real suit for Gil. Though Gabrielle seems undoubtedly innocent by comparison to Inez and Adriana, she works in an obscure little market selling cultural knick-knacks, and this ironic parallelism of the protagonist of Gil’s uncompleted novel is surely no coincidence.

The music supports such a conclusion. Cole Porter’s ‘Let’s Do It’ recurs in the film, and it is this song beaming from an old gramophone which first

Film Reviews

draws ours and Gil's attention to Gabrielle. The seductively joyful spirit of the song seems harmless. It actually featured in the Broadway musical *Paris* in 1928, having been written the same year, filled no doubt with the bluster of the booming 20s. Somewhat fatefully, however, that year also marked the eve of the Wall Street Crash. And if we consider the context of the film, the buoyant sounds are penetrated by the blissfully-hopeless nature of the lyrics, which take on a subtle layer of irony: "*and that's why birds do it, bees do it / even educated fleas do it / let's do it, let's fall in love.*"