

***Ghost Stories*, dir. by Andy Nyman, Jeremy Dyson** (Lionsgate Films, 2018)

Adapted by Jeremy Dyson and Andy Nyman from their 2010 stage play of the same name, *Ghost Stories* is an affectionate and self-reflexive homage to the British portmanteau-horror subgenre, and is as unabashedly melodramatic as it is deeply unsettling. The plot centres on the character Professor Goodman (played by Nyman), a parapsychologist and professional cynic who is compelled to review three unsolved cases: a night watchman encounters a poltergeist while on duty in an abandoned asylum for women; a teenage driver has an accident in the woods; and an affluent financier is haunted by the spirit of his unborn child. Male anguish bubbles under the surface and, as the cases unfold, Goodman begins to question his lack of faith in the supernatural, which, we are told, is a reaction against his strict, Jewish upbringing.

Although we see very little of it, the spectre of Goodman's childhood haunts the story like a fourth case. At the start of the film, we see a memory of his sister being violently thrown out of the family home by their father for being in a relationship with a South-Asian man. Goodman bears witness but is unable or unwilling to intervene. Not only does this flashback foreshadow the finale; it also emphasises the importance of accountability in each of the cases. Anxieties about fathers and fatherhood abound in *Ghost Stories* (the first case features a father consumed by the guilt he feels about not visiting his hospitalised daughter, who suffers from locked-in syndrome), while the text itself is equally haunted by its literary and cinematic ancestors. The nested structure, with Goodman's own story framing the three cases, is clearly a nod to the anthology horror films popularised by Amicus and Hammer studios in the 1960s and 70s, while the themes and imagery are evocative of Stephen King's tales of childhood trauma, such as *It* (1986). Additionally, the framing of these micro-narratives is reminiscent of the 'found-manuscript' device frequently deployed in gothic fiction: Goodman first encounters the cases when he receives a package in the post containing a tape recording from his presumed-dead hero Charles Cameron, a paranormal investigator and television personality from the 1970s who mysteriously disappeared at the height of his fame. Intrigued, Goodman agrees to meet Cameron at an eerie caravan site on the coast (one of several dilapidated, confined locations within the film), where he has been living in self-imposed exile since his 'disappearance'. Like the found manuscript, these cases are contested texts; Goodman openly interrogates their authenticity and in turn, the viewer questions his.

Set against the backdrop of contemporary Yorkshire, *Ghost Stories* is a decidedly British horror film that subtly confronts societal issues such as everyday racism and class

disparity without patronising its audience. The film has a pervasively claustrophobic feel, even during scenes set in the open countryside of the Peak District, an atmosphere which intensifies the sensation that you are never seeing the full picture. Throughout, ordinary spaces are rendered uncanny by the presence of misplaced and displaced images, such as a hooded figure lurking in the corner of an old photograph, or a cradle in the middle of a disused railroad. Like Nyman's previous work with psychological illusionist Derren Brown (their television collaborations include *Derren Brown – Mind Control* (2000-03), *Trick of the Mind* (2004-present), *Russian Roulette* (2003), *Séance* (2004), and *Messiah* (2005), plus four stage shows), *Ghost Stories* is loaded with visual and aural 'clues' that only make sense once the curtain has fallen. Both the stage play and the screen adaptation resemble a magic show in that objects and people disappear, only to reappear later when you least expect it. You cannot trust your sight because, to quote the tagline of the film, 'the brain sees what it wants to see' – a message that is echoed in the posters marketing the film release, which deliberately misspell the title as 'Ghost Storeis'. *Ghost Stories* is an exercise in sleight of hand, but who is pulling the strings? The use of misdirection keeps us groping in the dark for answers, but to what extent are we content to linger in a state of suspended disbelief, eagerly anticipating the rabbit-out-of-the-hat moment? *Ghost Stories* relies on our complete trust in Goodman's narrative and the big reveal does not work without this collusion.

Those familiar with the stage play will note several small yet significant changes. For example, the play opens with Goodman delivering a lecture on ghosts, whereas the film shows Goodman debunking a fraudulent psychic on live television, in front of an audience. Not only does he publicly expose the psychic, but he crushes the faith of a grieving mother who believes that she has been communicating with her dead son via the show's host. Far from remorseful, Goodman is at best smug, and at worst entitled; he clearly believes that he is doing gullible, superstitious people a favour. Goodman is a classic unreliable narrator, yet, ironically, the impact of the final sequence – which reveals him to be the unwilling creator of his own nightmare – hinges on the audience's trust in his 'master narrative'. Ultimately, Goodman's impulse to debunk the supernatural is less to do with protecting people from exploitation from faux mediums (his TV show is just as exploitative of the grieving mother as it is of the host) and everything to do with guilt. The real ghost of the story is memory – specifically, a repressed childhood memory in which Goodman witnesses a couple of bullies pressure a mentally handicapped boy to enter a drainage tunnel, causing him to have a fatal asthma attack. When Goodman finally confronts this memory, the fantasy scenario he has

created disintegrates, giving way to reality, which turns out to be far more terrifying than any ghost. As the fetid corpse of the dead boy pulls him towards his fate, the walls literally fall away to reveal a comatose Goodman lying on a hospital bed in a persistent vegetative state, which we learn is result of a failed suicide attempt. The effect of this ending is deeply uncomfortable, as it denies us a resolution and draws attention to our gullibility as viewers. Like the grieving woman in the paranormal television show that Goodman sabotages, our longing for the supernatural is exposed.

This climactic revelation may be subconsciously rooted in the Radcliffian tradition of providing a rational explanation for seemingly supernatural events; however, *Ghost Stories* retains an air of postmodern ambiguity that undercuts the formulaic tendencies of its genre. Its bizarre, darkly comic quality bears traces of Dyson's previous work on *The League of Gentlemen* (1999-2002 and 2017) (particularly Paul Whitehouse's night-watchman character in the first case covered by Goodman), as does the satirical lens through which it presents British culture. By adapting *Ghost Stories* for the screen, Nyman and Dyson have skilfully reanimated their highly successful show for a new audience, but in doing so, they risk forfeiting its mystery, particularly because the shock ending is likely to be a major talking point amongst audiences. In an age of too much information, the secrets of *Ghost Stories* cannot remain secret for long.

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