

"My body shivered": Emotions and empirical evidence of supernatural phenomena in Swedish popular culture

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Abstract

Contemporary ghost stories can be mediated through television series that familiarize viewers with the idea of supernatural/spiritual phenomena, and present a way of witnessing, experiencing and dealing with such phenomena. The Swedish TV series *Det Okända* (The Unknown) is an example of such a production. A – presumably – spiritual phenomenon is tailored to fit a popular culture format and is served to a broad audience. This article's focus is on the narration of the spiritual activity, the emotions that are expressed and the empirical evidence connected to such phenomena. Ghosts and their agendas, as well as their presence and activities, are performed and narrated by the people troubled by them, and by mediums called to help. In this article, I present some elements that categorize and frame ghosts in a modern Swedish society through the TV show *Det Okända*.

Keywords

Ghostlore, Folklore, Det Okända, Occulture, Narrative, Popular culture, Swedish TV

Introduction

Contemporary ghost stories can be mediated through television series that familiarize viewers with the idea of supernatural/spiritual phenomena, and present a way of witnessing, experiencing and dealing with such phenomena. The Swedish TV series *Det Okända* (The Unknown) is an example of such a production. A – presumably – spiritual phenomenon is tailored to fit a popular culture format and is served to a broad audience. This article's focus is on the narration of the spiritual activity that is mediated through a TV programme. Ghosts and their agendas, as well as their presence and activities, are performed and narrated by the people troubled by them, and by mediums called to help. While describing a ghost, a picture of the past is being produced. Further, a way to "have a ghost/ghostly activity" is provided, solidified and mediated to a broader audience. The main question posed here is: what functions of ghost tales are to be found in a modern transmission of folklore?

Ghost stories provoke emotional responses, personal engagement and a production of history. Although some have claimed that rationalism and science shall purify Western societies of idle folk religions or folk beliefs, the evidence suggests that "secularization" has been regarded mostly in connection to

institutionalized religion while the technological boom might generate, rather than hinder, folk beliefs (Cowdell 2011, 4-13). In this article, I present some elements that categorize and frame ghosts in modern Swedish society by focusing on *Det Okända*.

For the purpose of this article, I focus on the story, its performance and transmission. I consciously avoid discussing too much the televised form of it, scene cuts, editing, etc. This is motivated by the scope of this text. It allows the analysis to go into the functions of the tale. Further, an interviewed person who works as a medium indicated that (in her opinion) the show was very close to actual séances (interview with Maja 14.02.2019). This suggests that forms of transmission might help to facilitate understanding of how to "have a ghost" without changing the performance beyond recognition.

Ghosts mediated through TV are a global phenomenon, with different TV productions from the US to Pakistan, from ghost stories presented by celebrities to hunting mythical creatures (Pulliam 2016e, 247-249). An American medium called Theresa Caputo has had her own TV show known as *Long Island Medium*, where she does readings for people, even for strangers on a street (Pulliam 2016c, 198-199). There was a Norwegian production based on the same premises as *Det Okända*, called *Åndenets Makt (Power of the Spirits)*, broadcast between 2005 and 2015, which attracted more than 500,000 viewers for some episodes (Veka, 2013). The Swedish programme is available for Norwegian viewers.

Background

Folk beliefs have been a popular field of study, and in the contemporary scholarship they are connected to new forms of folklore that have appeared in connection to mass and social media. International research within folk beliefs and folktales engages with modern ghostlore.

British folklorist Paul Cowdell (2011) has demonstrated the complexity of ghostlore in England, as well as the persistence of the beliefs. Historian Owen Davies published a book about a social history of ghosts called *The Haunted* (2007), taking into consideration socio-cultural developments and intellectual discussions in European countries (though focused mostly on England and France) throughout the centuries. Davies sees explanations of modern ghostlore in the discussions and propaganda wars between the Protestant and Catholic writers that took place after the Reformation, with many Protestant intellectuals regarding belief in ghosts as "Catholic superstitions" or "machinations" (2007, 104-106; 165-168).

It is worth noting that the idea of mediums communicating with spirits gained popularity and became an established practice during the 19th century through Spiritism which is "a religious movement that centers on a medium's communication with the spirits of the departed" (Otero 2016, 35). In 1857 *The Book of the Spirits* was published (first in French, then translated to other

European languages), codifying and popularizing the core ideas of the movement. Spiritism was presented as "a scientific case", against materialist beliefs, and argued for the existence of the supernatural (Otero 2016, 35-36).

In the Swedish context, publications about ghosts include an overview of new/alternative religious practices (Arlebrand 1995), a commercial publication about recorded supernatural phenomena in modern Sweden (Svahn 2006), and publications on mythical beings and folk beliefs based on archival material (Stattin 1991; Wolf-Knuts 1991; Swahn 2010; Henriksson 2012). The cultural-historical perspective on folk beliefs about death and fear of the dead was presented by ethnologist Bo Lönnqvist (2013). Interest in ghost narratives has been also visible in diverse Scandinavian research (Pentikäinen 1968; Honko 1973; Östling 2012; Meurling 2016).

Researcher of religion Jessica Moberg (2015) has written about the presence of spiritual media in Swedish TV. Her study focuses on people working as spiritual mediums, and how profit-oriented commercial TV channels opened up for "new religions experiences." Moberg connects this to high modernity and a plethora of mass media (2015, 10-15). There have also been publications in the American context concerning a connection of ghost stories and popular culture (Goldstein, Grider & Thomas 2007).

Further, Jessica Moberg thoroughly analyzes the phenomenon of "occult TV" in Sweden and connects it to the term "occulture" used by Christopher Partridge (Moberg 2019, 118; Partridge 2004). One of the main examples presented is *Det Okända*. The occult reality TV is a development that falls in line with various ways of communicating the unknown or spiritual realities. In that light, different mass media have been regarded as expressions of folklore (Bronner 2011, 398-450; Blank 2009, 2013; Blank & Howard 2013; McNeill 2013, 2018; Oring 2013). Folk beliefs have become more common material on TV rather than rare curiosity. In Sweden, numerous qualitative questionnaires about ghosts have been conducted as well. The latest came in 2018 by the Institute for Language and Folklore in Göteborg. Ethnologist Per-Anders Östling discussed briefly the phenomenon of modern ghost beliefs and its functions as warning against danger (2012, 35-44).

The programme *Det Okända* has been researched in the context of the programme's participants' spiritual beliefs (Moberg 2016). However, recent ethnographic studies of the cultural functions of ghostlore are scarce. A Finnish study from 1977 (translated 1990) was based on a questionnaire about a "supernatural experience" (Virtanen 1990, 24). The focus was on "experience" in regard to "reality" and the "supernatural" (1990, 21-23). The focus in this article is on the folkloristic understanding of traditional ghost narratives and the roles that they can play in modern society.

Although the media element in the programme is important and crucial, for the purpose of this study I shall focus on the narrations that are presented. In a publication concerning Victorian women's ghost stories, Sarah Jane Bissell (2014)

concluded that ghost narratives provided a platform for criticizing women's social and cultural position in the patriarchal Victorian society. I am inclined to focus on functions in the same manner, as telling a story of a ghost disturbing people's daily routines, and showing it on TV, provides a picture of how one can interpret the past and the present.

Theoretical framework

In this article, I engage with theoretical concepts of transmission (McNeill 2013), performance (Noyes 2012; Bauman 2012), and narrative (Herman 2009; Santino 1988; Favret-Saada 1980). The combination of these concepts is used to analyze the connections between form and function of ghost stories, and how history is constructed and performed in stories and on TV.

As the focus is on ghostlore (ghost tales), the theoretical frame is based on definitions provided by folklorist Dan Ben-Amos that regarded folklore as a type of communication in small groups (1971, 3-15). That definition can be connected to the understanding of a narrative as a source of sense-making of the everyday. I follow the narratologist David Herman's position in regarding a narrative as a basic human way of dealing with the everyday and making sense of everyday life (2009).

Folklorist Jack Santino (1988) has shown that ghost stories in the Anglo-Saxon context are connected to certain occupations, for example in the airline industry. Following folkloristic research practice, Santino demonstrated the importance of "suspension of disbelief" when his interviewed informants – people working on advanced technologies and responsible for security of many people – could simultaneously disregard ghost stories as nonsense, and then as something they could believe in. This contradiction, expressed in different social contexts, allowed Santino to show different uses of a specific, emotional narrative.

The connection between material (empirical) evidence and a certain narrative was presented by French ethnologist Jeanne Favret-Saada in her book about witchcraft in a French region close to Paris in the late 1970s (1980). Favret-Saada conducted her fieldwork in an environment that on the one hand disregarded spells as ridiculous relics from the past, but on the other hand searched for explanations of misfortunes, deaths and accidents in supernatural powers of those who did not wish well and wanted to harm others.

Favret-Saada's informants were modern French citizens fully accepting the developments in the modern, enlightened world, but also capable of presenting a specific narrative based on "facts" and "evidence" in order to seek help and relief. Favret-Saada touched upon narrative and performance when contextualizing her data in the cultural-temporal frame that affected what, when and how words were used. The stories are performed when transmitted. The concept of performance used in this article refers to the understanding presented by folklorists Dorothy Noyes and Richard Bauman. Noyes refers to the function of performances as building communities and groups. This, in turn, results in a

transmission that facilitates a social network that is bounding a group together (2012, 20). Richard Bauman invokes "interpretive frame" as an element that a performer can use as connection and that can "also give form to the performer's act of expression and shape it as a text" (2012, 103).

This textual understanding of performance connects to transmission that can be analyzed in programmes such as *Det Okända*. Because I apply a folkloristic understanding of the lore and the transmission of the stories (albeit through a specific medium: TV), I focus on the transmission of a story through performance rather than the transmission through the TV screen. Folklorist Lynn S. McNeill remarks that "The necessary folk transmission of information in order to identify it as folklore is at the root of the discipline's unique focus on performance, reception and context" (2012, 176). Even though televised, it is people's stories that are transmitted. Twentieth-century folklorists embraced new media as expressions of folklore, showing that the difference of scale (i.e. number of viewers or users) does not disregard the importance of the tale.

Ghost stories depend on media transmission and work in a network of symbols required for communicating the lore of a specific folk group. Folklorist Lauri Honko (1973) pointed out the empirical evidence required to validate a claim of spiritual experiences (sensing, hearing, and seeing). An experience of a ghost has to be performed correctly in order to fit a pattern and be recognized as a ghost. Thus, performance and transmission of the lore are supposedly validating the experience as a ghostly one. Cowdell pointed out that when retelling a ghost story, informants "weigh evidence. They assess the world in which they hold their beliefs and tell their stories, including its media" (2011, 17). A story of a ghost is framed in its cultural setting and it is narrated and transmitted via oral communication or TV programmes and performed in front of an audience.

The material

The material presented here is based on several episodes of *Det Okända*. Because there are about 300 different episodes, it is not in the scope of the article to discuss them all, and some examples have been selected as they illustrate the patterns visible throughout the series. It should be stressed that the episodes are very repetitive. The approach here is to focus on the narration used to identify, frame, and construct a ghostly experience. The attention to the mediated performances of ghosts was motivated by Santion's (1988) and Favret-Saada's (1980) observations that there are different degrees of belief and disbelief, thus different functions of stories concerning supernatural phenomena.

In addition to analyzing the episodes from the series, I have interviewed one person who identified herself as a professionally educated medium who had been working for some time in that profession. The interview was conducted by telephone. The medium was informed about the purpose of the interview and of a possible publication. I did not seek additional informants as the focus was on a programme and the scope of the article is to highlight the functions of the phenomenon.

The stories presented in *Det Okända* are basically narratives of haunted houses. The genre of a "ghost story" or a "haunted house" story is a literary form of entertainment that gained popularity during the 19th century. Oliver Onions' (1911) novella *The Beckoning Fair One* is presented as a classic example of a haunted house story where the protagonist experiences mysterious sounds that could be attributed to paranormal activity but that could be also interpreted through psychology and the vivid imagination of the protagonist (Fronseca 2016, 19). Haunted house narratives were popular in Japan in the 18th century (Bishop 2016, 147), and there are numerous famous literary creations based on the motif. The genre developed into a detective-like take on the matter, with a scientific approach to the paranormal, which is "an American invention, whereby the existence of the paranormal is proven by science" (Bishop 2016, 148). The main elements taken from the programme are narratives about the ghosts: how ghosts are talked about.

"Am I crazy?" Rationality, emotions and logic

The show presented here ran from 2004 for 29 seasons (two every year), ending in 2019.¹ The structure of the programme is as follows: one experiences something in a house or apartment (or, in a few instances, in a shop or beauty salon). The occurrences are disturbing and unnerving, and they cannot be explained "rationally". The TV crew is called upon, and then a medium is invited, going around the house, localizing and describing the spiritual activities, sometimes giving plenty of details about the ghost's past, with names, occupations and life histories. Mediums – people who communicate with the spirits of the dead (Pulliam 2016d, 206-208) – constitute a crucial element. They are experts who deal with a problem. The programme ends (usually) with the ghost being sent "to the light", with a short final visit some weeks later to confirm that the medium did a good job and that the unwanted activities/feelings disappeared (see Moberg 2019, 125-126).

Det Okända is an example of ghostly problem solving: a medium and a camera crew visit a haunted house and deal with "supernatural" activities (usually) by sending the ghosts "to the light". This kind of TV show, sometimes referred to as a docusoap (documentary + soap opera; also Reality TV), with mediums communicating with spirits, has appeared in both fictional and more documentary-like productions (Pulliam 2016d, 206-208). The mix of spirituality and expressions of popular culture relates to the concept of "occulture" that has already been mentioned (Partridge 2004; 2016). Popular culture and its creations can draw on spiritual motifs, making a version of "enchanted realities" that become popular. That disrupts the idea of a rational and disenchanting world (Partridge 2016, 317). Partridge makes a strong argument for new religious expressions visible through popular culture, or even created with the help of pop-cultural expressions. My argument, though, is that the mediating of ghosts can

¹ All the episodes referred to in the article have been available online on TV4 website (Se *Det Okända* på TV4 Play). MMS, a service measuring viewer numbers, estimated *Det Okända* to have attracted 191,000 viewers on 29 January 2018.

have different functions as well, and these are visible in the programme *Det Okända*.

The mechanisms of choosing the participants are not explained, but the first 15 minutes of every episode presents the person/family/people with the problem when they tell about their experiences. In the second section of the programme, a medium arrives. There have been several different mediums every season, male and female, older and younger, presenting different styles and different ways of examining places. Mediums' "findings" are juxtaposed with bits previously told by participants to the TV crew. These bits are used to confirm that the medium feels, sees or hears the same things or recognizes memories of different incidents involving the ghosts. The third part of the programme continues to show the work of the medium, usually including the most important findings – the identity of the ghost is suggested. Sometimes it is a deceased family member, and the ghost or ghosts are sent to the light (sometimes with help of the participants who stand in the circle, hold hands, close their eyes and concentrate). In the final slot, the programme leader, Caroline Giertz, visits the house after several weeks to confirm that the unwanted activities have stopped.²

One of the main elements of the narratives in every episode is the disbelief that something irrational or illogical would be happening in a normal house. Participants react to sounds, movements, and visual stimuli that make them uncomfortable, jumpy, or scared. Fear is often the main factor motivating participants to contact the programme in the first place. The spiritual activities become too much to bear, the family has no peace and this takes its toll on their health, both mental and physical, as well as on relationships in the family (for example, episode 2 season 19 from August 2015; episode 8 season 16 from January 2014).

What the scared family members often seek is an explanation. The belief in ghosts is thus connected to the discussion of modernity and the repeated expectations that such superstitious beliefs should end, yet they persist and are not erased by rationalism and science (Cowdell 2011, 11; 156). In fact, many of the participants are not convinced there is a ghost in their household, but they just run out of "logical explanations". Additionally, there are quite a few episodes when one person (usually a woman) believes, and the partner does not (see Moberg 2019).

There is an underlying notion that the experiences, translated to emotions, are against the modern-day narrative of logic and rationality. Often, the medium that searches the house says to the family: "You are not crazy", "You feel things others don't", or "Your experiences are real" (for example, episode 4 season 20 from February 2016; episode 7 season 19 from September 2015). People can react emotionally upon hearing that their experiences are felt by the medium as well (for example, episode 11 season 20 from April 2016). One can ponder that

² On several rare occasions the houses were revisited to cleanse them more as one session has not helped (for example, episode 5 season 6 from January 2015).

there is both fear of the spiritual world roaming around one's house, but also fear of being irrational, of being crazy. Ghostlore, as demonstrated by Santino (1988), depends on the context of utterance and performance, resulting in different degrees of stating the belief in ghosts, or "suspension of disbelief" (1988, 212). In Santino's examples, the same person could retell a ghost story as something he/she would believe in, or as "mere entertainment". By framing the emotions as an extra sense, an additional layer of understanding and exploring the world, a medium constructs a narrative that removes the fear of irrationality.

In terms of performance, folklorist Dorothy Noyes commented on the roles of cultural forms in social bonding, highlighting: "the role of performance in making bounded groups seem like objective realities; the transmission of cultural form in the creation of social networks; and the creation of a sense of communal belonging in individuals" (Noyes 2012, 20). The exchanges in episodes of *Det Okända* produce understanding within groups and establish a pattern of performance.

The existing academic material often positions ghostlore in a crossing of different ideological discussions, such as Protestant vs. Catholic, pre-modern vs. modern/postmodern, organized religion vs. folk beliefs, organized religion vs. "new religious movements", natural vs. supernatural. Those dichotomies are crucial for contextualizing modern Swedish ghostlore, but seem unable to explain the modern usage of and fascination with such narrations. Although urbanization and commodification have been described as contributing to the processes of secularization (Davies 2007, 245), the belief in ghosts and possibilities of communicating with them have not been shaken in modern societies. As historian Owen Davies puts it, "the future looks bright for the ghosts" (2007, 241), with statistics suggesting a rise in ghost beliefs (Davies 2007, 241-245).

Mediums working in the programme strengthen the idea that there is another layer of knowledge, of studying the world. The presence of the spiritual being is thus dependent on two discourses of knowledge – that there is a distinction between "rational", officially accepted knowledge and that the participants get access to an additional dimension through emotions. Thus, emotionality gains a specific status that is framed in the discourse of "You are not crazy". It can be said that the programme follows the theoretical approach of emotions as practice (Scheer 2012) but at the same time strengthens the distinction of rational and irrational in order to identify a ghostly presence.

"I sense a presence here" is a sentence uttered often by mediums during their work (for example, episode 11 season 20 from April 2016; episode 3 season 19 from September 2015). Although the "emotional understanding" is shown there as a valid, even higher way of knowing the world, the narrative does not include the social dimension of constructing emotions and their expressions (Ahmed 2004). Participants get a medium to explain to them what, how and why they feel. The validity of the experience depends on the assessment of the

professional who can say that yes, one's fears are justified (e.g. the ghost is aggressive and malicious, trying to do harm) or that the felt presence is actually a friendly ghost, hence fear is not needed.

The knowledge of how to feel a ghost is then mediated through TV. The interviewed medium, when asked her opinion about the reliability of the programme structure and proceedings, was very positive. She stressed that it is very authentic, that one cannot fake it, and that the house-cleansing sessions she participated in were "exactly like those on TV" (interview with Maja, 14.02.2019). One has to take into consideration though that a learned pattern does not have to be fake, it just means that it is an accepted way to make sense of the phenomenon and guarantee its accountability (Herman 2009, 8). Thus, ghosts are presented as phenomena allowing knowledge transmission through emotions. One could remark that it is a way of speaking about a ghost that makes "an uneasy feeling" into a real ghost. Christopher Partridge stresses that "occulture identifies the ordinary enchantment of the everyday and those processes by which particular nonsecular meanings emerge, are disseminated, and become influential in societies and individual lifeworlds" (2016, 321). With spirituality in *Det Okända* one can see how ghosts become normalized, almost codified and used according to a scheme that lets people act in everyday situations.

As the sociologist Dorothy Smith remarked, "The actual events are not facts. (...) A fact is something which is already categorized, which is already worked up so that it conforms to the model of what that fact should be like" (Smith 1978, 35). To have a ghost, one has to be able to provide evidence for it. The senses make up the basis for evidence that has to fit the traditional description of having a ghost. The best evidence the participants can provide is their feelings and emotions, usually negative, which serve as a source of information. Even though their houses can be perfectly safe, the emotions tell something different. Mediums lift that fact as crucial in successfully recognizing a spiritual activity. Simultaneously, having spiritual activity means that one feels/senses more. The question seems to morph from "is that a ghost" to "can you sense that ghost". A special "pattern of speaking, not only of language" (Ben-Amos and Goldstein 1975, 4) is demonstrated here, as a performance of "wording" a ghost is needed to have a legitimate case for it.

Safety, good moods and headaches

Finnish folklorist Lauri Honko remarked that ghostlore is not just a story – it is an empirical phenomenon that can be heard, seen, sensed, touched, and sometimes even smelled (Honko 1973, 15). All these elements appear in the programme *Det Okända*. How does one know that there is a ghost? The list is long. The most generic ghostlore generated by *Det Okända* involves a family home, often a dream home in the countryside. For example, one feels cold in some parts of the house; one is afraid to be in certain rooms; children have difficulties falling asleep; there is a draft; one feels uneasy without any particular reason; there

are unexplainable sounds and cracks; there are shadowy figures showing themselves; family pets are distressed; friends and family do not like to visit; objects move, are replaced, or get broken; doors and cupboards open; lights go on or off without reason; one has headaches often; there is a sensation of being touched, or even strangled, or sensing something/someone by the edge of the bed at night; a sudden fear makes one jump – all these elements appear quite regularly in the retellings of ghosts (see Moberg 2019, 126).

Some of the spiritual activity could be classified as “poltergeists” which are “spirits that are able to cause a disturbance by moving or striking objects, and in some instances, they can even injure people and animals” (Pulliam 2016e, 256-258). In general, there are emotions, feelings that mediate the spiritual being through interpreting physical activities. Even though there is materiality involved, like opening doors or teacups moving around, the emotional reaction connected to them is narrated as guiding the understanding (for example, episode 1 season 22 or episode 3 season 22, both from January 2017).

In one episode, a young, male medium described seeing a dark silhouette of a ghost, feeling ill in his stomach because of the ghost’s malice, feeling the memory of being choked, sweating because of fear, hearing music connected to another ghost, smelling coffee as the friendlier ghost liked it, and also tasting liquorice as the friendlier ghost liked it too (episode 9 season 23 from November 2017). All these details were very precise and largely confirming the family’s experiences, though not smells or tastes. Not all the mediums are able to provide such detailed empirical evidence, but ghosts are usually able to open cabinets, move things around, or create dark shadows (for example, episode 8 season 23 from November 2017). Nevertheless, all mediums provide clues that are compatible with what has been experienced in the places they investigate. Their professionalism and trustworthiness is framed by the statement appearing a couple of times in the programme that they have not received any information prior to their visit to the family in need.

In a way, this is a very rational course of events. If one has problems with sockets, one calls an electrician. Likewise, if one has problems with atmosphere and feelings in different parts of the house, one might as well call on a professional medium to fix it. It seems that often the underlying emotion is fear rather than curiosity or minor displeasures. There is a sense of danger, fear in one’s own home. Thus, the programme is not a “ghost-busters” format, as my medium informant remarked it. Rather it is about help, restoring order and peace, and giving space back to the homeowners (interview with Maja 14.02.2019). The narrative of uneasiness in one’s own home presupposes another story – that one’s own home is a safe space. Numerous episodes of *Det Okända* present the participants as a family in their dream house, making it beautiful and cozy, and yet not being able to find peace. The “unsafe safe-space” is then constructed. The dramatic call for a medium is sometimes strengthened by the solemn confession that maybe one has to leave the place – house or

apartment – because one cannot bear being there anymore (for example, episode 1 season 22 from January 2017).

Unexplainable headaches, mood swings, colds and drafts, tiredness and lack of energy receive a name – there is a ghost, and often it is (if ever so slightly) malicious. The explanation is narrated while a medium goes through the house/apartment and lists ghostly activities, providing an explanation of the emotions arousing from sensual experiences. The narrative works as a strategy to navigate the world (Herman 2009, 2). This is also connected with the aforementioned rational-irrational discussion, as feeling unsafe in one's safe-space needs to be explained, justified, and resolved. As narratologist David Herman writes:

Science explains the atmospheric processes that (all other things being equal) account for when precipitation will take the form of snow rather than rain; but it takes a story to convey what it was like to walk along a park trail in fresh-fallen snow as afternoon turned to evening (Herman 2009, 2)

Indeed, the beautiful or carefully arranged interiors do not have to provide warmth and safety. The participants seem lost in trying to find explanations for why they would not feel good. It is illogical, irrational. The rational, evidence-based explanation is provided by a medium.

Multiple *Det Okända* episodes involve a narrative of children and their well-being. One episode with a Dutch medium featured a helpless family hearing the confirmation of their worst fears uttered repeatedly by the medium: "It is not safe for the children here" (episode 1 season 22 from January 2017; see also episode 4 season 20 from February 2016). The safety and well-being of children is part of what David Herman refers to as a *storyworld*. Storyworlds can be defined as "mental models of who did what to and with whom, when, where, why, and in what fashion in the world to which recipients relocate – or make a deictic shift – as they work to comprehend a narrative" (Herman 2009, 9). Identifying one's safe-space as a dangerous place for one's children marks an important shift in a narrative; it redefines that space, and makes parents' concerns valid and legitimized. It is not only one's fears or fantasy; there is a concern that has been present in different discourses in the society – a professional (a medium) informs about hidden dangers that might result in lack of sleep, inability to concentrate, or sadness of the offspring.

That narrative is powerful because another, unexpected danger appears in the storyworld of family life. Children have to be protected. The supernatural danger is then framed in terms of everyday concerns about children's well-being (and other people's well-being as well). The medium is able to explain negative feelings and emotions as legitimate causes of concern/fear and a logical response in the storyworld of taking care of one's family. In the introduction to *Ghosts in Popular Culture and Legend*, June Pulliam writes: "The modern ghost story is also unique in that it is difficult to distinguish the difference between fact and fiction"

(Pulliam 2016a, xix). Certainly, here the existence of spiritual activities is explained through factual emotions – you feel it is not right, and the reason for it is a ghost. The narrative is performed through a medium, and then mediated through TV as well. Folklorist Richard Bauman links performance to stance-taking:

That is, the performer, by invoking the performance frame, takes up a particular position, or alignment, to his or her act of expression, the assumption of responsibility for a display of communicative skill and efficacy. Stancetaking, though, is a reciprocal act. By entering into performance, the performer inevitably invokes the complementary stance of audience member, inviting co-participants to assume an alignment to the performance that demands an evaluative response and perhaps more, such as verbal acknowledgement, commentary, encouragement, or ratification (Bauman 2012, 101)

The performance on TV fits the expectations of the people in trouble – it identifies the danger and it resolves it. Simultaneously, it recreates the pattern while “walking and talking it”. As Bauman points out, the main performers here – the ghost owners and the medium – are dependent on each other and on the communication established on the spot. The assurance comes not only from nods and glances, but also from the cut scenes of their narration when the medium “gets it right”, when some details are strikingly similar. The fear of the parents is translated into the performance of action and reaction, which is then transmitted to the TV audience.

It is the narrative that is able to connect both fictional and factual elements, showing fears as both the reason and the explanation. Similar techniques of working logic are to be seen in Favret-Saada’s account on witchcraft in France. She recognizes that “the act, in witchcraft, is the word” and simultaneously, “these spoken words are power, and not knowledge or information” as “to talk, in witchcraft, is never to inform” (1980, 9). Favret-Saada points out that any exchanged words, in witchcraft, are to be used; they have a purpose to harm or to heal. Her study of the witchcraft practices was far more complex and challenging (involving actual deaths interpreted as results of spells cast) than the ghosts wandering around Swedish properties, but the power of identifying, framing, and imposing an action on a spirit through words is still noticeable. Mediums have the power (or skill) to cleanse, release and help through their special, “professional” verbal utterances. Their performance has to be trustworthy as it is based mostly on words. It is a narrative event that serves as a twofold blueprint: it establishes a canon of having a ghost, and provides a system of identification through a performative speech.

Ghosts and their agendas

A medium usually describes the ghost and its life, position, family relations etc. It is a special point in every episode that a medium is never informed about the circumstances or happenings, and that no details are shared prior to filming. In the interview, my medium informant stated that, even though the profession “is

still a taboo”, the number of working mediums has grown in recent years: “It is many, many people. We are talking in thousands” (interview with Maja 14.02.2019).

Those mediums that were present in the show varied greatly in their styles of presentation and ways of explaining. Some gave very specific details, with ages, names, and causes of death. However, this factual information could only rarely be verified. The names provided are often generic and popular, and mediums usually stress that it is not easy to get any proper information from ghosts. On the rare occasions when the details matched deceased people, their families sued the programme for misrepresenting dead persons or trespassing on the private life of others. In 2016, one family became upset that their recently deceased father was portrayed as an angry ghost that wanted to scare people. The family stressed that he was a nice, friendly, loving person (Borgert 2016).

Why do ghosts bother Swedish households? Often, there is a combination of ghosts and reasons. If there is a mean, aggressive ghost, it is usually connected to a place, and not to a family that experiences it.³ The mean ghost is often paired with a protective ghost. In other words, there is a mean creature trying to harm a family that does not belong to that family, and a protective spirit that is more often than not a ghost of a family member. Hence, the “good spirit” is just there to make sure everything is OK. The unfriendly spirit is sometimes unaware of being dead, or it is confused. One medium said that ghosts are often “not right in their heads” and that being forced to stay on earth makes them slightly crazy (episode 4 season 20 from February 2016). On some occasions, ghosts try to protect their former properties or are just mean and horrible in character.

Curiously, it is men/masculine ghosts that are usually more aggressive while female ghosts bring peace, light, and care (see, for example, episode 1 season 22 from January 2017; episode 11 season 20 from April 2016; episode 7 season from 17 January 2015; episode 5 season 6 from January 2015). Moreover, masculine ghosts are more often described as wearing used and dirty clothes or as having the tired appearance and dirty hands of manual workers. In general, the ghosts represent a rather grim picture of the past: they worked hard, experienced different hardships and tragedies, did not express love to their children or spouses, or were mean and angry when alive. These serve as reasons for them still being on earth rather than “moving on”. One can connect this to the purpose of occulture as “occulture is concerned with whatever passes for nonsecular ‘knowledge’ in society” (Partridge 2016, 321). The function of this knowledge is intriguing. The picture produced is a story that serves the present while narrating the past.

Folklorist Henry Glassie comments on the concept of history: “History is not the past; it is an artful assembly of materials from the past, designed for usefulness in the future” (Glassie 1995, 395). Spirits, and narratives of former lives,

³ This is a reappearing pattern, seen for instance in episode 11 season 20 from April 2016 as the male ghost is identified as someone previously living on the property.

represent one such assembly. When a ghost is said to be from the 1920s, for example, its (often sad) life story is an illustration of that specific period. Simultaneously, the unhappy life is an explanation of a ghost engaging in haunting activities after death. Mediums, through their narrations of spirits, engage the audience in a specific time travelling experience.

One can see some stereotypes emerging through the narration – male vs. female, good vs. bad, light vs. darkness. Duality is produced as fears and concerns are dispersed through mediums' professional investigations of spiritual activities. People from the past get to enact the past as they are given roles in the narratives presented by mediums. The transmission is complex as there are different audiences at once – the affected family members learn about their spiritual companions and the TV audience follows the progress. The reader/hearer has to do additional reading procedures as not all the elements are given, the episodes are cut and adjusted, and a chosen version of the proceedings is presented in a sequence that has been decided in a studio. Hence, the success of the operation of identifying a ghost depends on the reader/hearer who "reads" the situation, relates to the medium and given details, and accepts the story as one that makes sense, presenting a recognizable storyworld (Smith 1978, 38).

Even though mediums talk about darkness and light, good and bad energy, concepts like heaven or hell do not appear often. The narrative includes this life and afterlife in light where ghosts should be, though sometimes they get lost on their way. When ghosts are found and identified and proper communication between a medium and ghosts is established, the spirits are sent to the light. It is understood that they will be better off, finally in peace, finally leaving the problems and issues behind. Ghosts do not seem to have "unfinished businesses", and sometimes the phenomenon is classified as "event memory". Through mediums' readings, one goes from fear to pity and will to help the lost souls. The shift is through narration. Once the scary sounds, movements, and shadows are given a name, shreds of personality and a rough life-story, the power shifts to those on earth as they can be helpers in this narrative and send spirits away.

It is said that mediums use so-called "cold reading" when doing their work. It is a technique that allows them to obtain information while analyzing the participant's style, interior furnishings, taste, gender, class, ethnicity, education etc. (Dutton 1988). The technique "depend[s] initially on the Barnum effect, the tendency for people to embrace generalized personality descriptions as idiosyncratically their own" (Dutton 1988, 326). Hence, ghosts of grandmas used to be stern but fair, and usually very productive and preoccupied. Grandfathers were often quiet and aloof, but full of love nevertheless. Hard work, tired hands, many diseases and general hardships appear in the stories too, and participants recognize their deceased family members. Even though there are surprising details and sometimes families are very impressed with what mediums can see, a pattern of transmission appear, making a picture of the past. Certainly, not all

is gloomy and the “protective spirits” can represent a better, sunnier, happier version of the past. That happier past serves more as a contrast than an alternative version. Sorrow appears more vividly when put in rays of light.

Folklorist Richard Bauman has stated that “The communicative resources that key performance, that is, that frame the performer’s display of virtuosity, also give form to the performer’s act of expression and shape it as a text: bounded off to a degree from its discursive surround, internally cohesive, semantically meaningful” (Bauman 2012, 103). The ghost is performed through the emotions, gestures, recollections, beliefs and rituals that were filmed during episodes of *Det Okända*. Transmitted in a specific way, and performed in an established pattern of knowledge through emotions, ghosts materialize, disturb, communicate and are sent away.

Conclusion – ghostly traditions

Ghosts on TV represent a version of modern folklore that acquired a new way of spreading and evolving, making it a tradition. Folklorist Lynne S. McNeill writes:

In shorthand: genre + transmission = tradition. In a way, this is similar to what folklorists have been getting at for some time now with summative phrases like “artistic communication” (genre) “in small groups” (shared group transmission), or even the more basic equation of “folk” (shared group transmission) plus “lore” (genre). In a sense, it could be argued that folklore simply *is* tradition, the stuff that gets passed or transmitted informally among a group of people. (McNeill 2013, 183)

McNeill points out the key elements in tradition-forming, and these are, even quite crudely, visible in the case of *Det Okända*. A genre of a ghost story is transmitted in a special way – in a televised reality show, with characters that are different in every episode, yet that have similar, if not identical, functions. A tradition of TV spiritual stories is thus being established. It is no longer just ghostlore; it fits modern audiences watching dramatized spiritual procedures. It shows, establishes and teaches the folk how to “have a ghost”: what elements are necessary, what stories are needed to justify it, and how to deal with it. It also provides a blueprint for working mediums. We are, as society, more likely to be pleasantly surprised that something in reality is “just like on TV” rather than marvel that a TV programme is “just like real life”.

Neither the advance of technology and science nor the critical view of religious beliefs has eliminated folk tales about ghosts and spirits. On the contrary, speedy development of technology appears to facilitate more stories of this kind (Cowdell 2011). Moreover, such stories gain an interesting perspective through commodification of various media, including TV programmes that narrate personal encounters and help from mediums. A prime example of this is *Det Okända*.

The programme follows the pattern of “apparition narratives”, known as a literary form from the 17th century (Pulliam 2016b, 9). It is “the objective

retelling of a ghost story with the goal of determining whether or not an actual manifestation of the supernatural has occurred" (Pulliam 2016, 9). As a genre, it was supposed to prove the existence of spirits, and thus of a higher being (i.e., the divine), and in that way challenge the wave of atheism that came with the Enlightenment (Pulliam 2016b, 9).

The focus on functions of stories challenges the dichotomies like organized vs. folk religion, formal vs. informal, rational vs. irrational, modern vs. un-modern or even believer vs. non-believer, as such categorizations appear in the material. The lore exists and finds new ways of spreading and manifesting (through mass media and produced and edited TV programmes). Rather than categorizing the phenomenon, or disregarding it as not being up to the standards of modernity or organized religion, one can focus on the process of transmission of a certain story. Further, the interaction between individuals and the mediums who facilitate the "communication" with ghosts produces a version of the past, a history that includes the dead and their social and cultural positioning in the narrative. New ways of transmitting the lore bring new possibilities and challenges, and can influence (for example, by standardizing) stories or the way they are performed.

The programme exemplifies moral and mental struggles of modern (or postmodern) digitalized society with easy access to technology that cannot completely grasp the complexities of reality. The ghostlore presented in *Det Okända* travels between rational and irrational narratives, and tries to bridge the gap that seemingly exists in the society, or perhaps it is constructed in order to be bridged. The remedy for fears, headaches, uneasy atmospheres at home and lack of energy are emotions that would guide the understanding. A special "emotional rationality" is lifted as a reason for experiencing a ghost and as the means to deal with the spiritual issue. Emotions as understanding, response to a situation, and investment are interesting elements appearing in a ghostlore that make it "reasonable", "acceptable" and "logical". Emotionality is thus both a reason and a solution.

The ghosts in Swedish homes seem to be disconnected from any particular branch of religion, yet influenced by and based on Christianity. Depending on the medium, the performance is mixed at times with different rites or rituals. Thus, one could discuss the rituals as secular rather than religious per se. It is more a "secular ceremony" rather than religious one, even though it involves faith in supernatural beings and the afterlife (Moore and Myerhoff 1977, 5). It is possible to interpret the procedures as such because the episodes follow a ritualistic pattern: repetition, acting, special behaviour or stylization, order, evocative presentational style, staging, and a collective dimension. All those can constitute a secular ceremony (Moore and Myerhoff 1977, 7-8). The concern is with the emotional disturbance that does not need to lead to belief, or does not presuppose a belief, as ghosts are "rationally" explained and dealt with.

Even though in some of the “readings” mediums do appear to be far-fetched, or extremely general, or even failed guesses, they can appeal to the narrative of the past that many of us are familiar with through different channels, and that includes popular culture. Lives of our ancestors were harsh, full of sorrow and disappointment. It was a struggle to survive. The cultural memory of modern, affluent Sweden carries a postcard from the past that is painted in bleak colors. Surely, spirits from the past would be as distressed as when they occupied human bodies. The storyworld presented is not a surprise; if anything it is just logical. Happy ghosts do not spook, but unhappy or concerned ghosts do. It helps to construct a narrative through a contrast of the past and present. The narrative thus works as “everyday psychology” helping to navigate everyday life (Herman 2009).

Advances of technology and science, and presupposed secularization (based on falls in religious service attendance and self-reported beliefs in God, see Thurfjell 2015, 23-30), do not seem to have negatively affected ghost stories. If anything, new ways of transmission, like TV programmes, are already acknowledged.

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