

After the popularity in the 1950s of Nigel Kneale's Quatermass serials and his adaptation of Orwell's *1984*, science fiction television programmes scripted by Kneale were seen as significant events by schedulers, critics and audiences alike. In 1972, Kneale was commissioned by the BBC's Head of Drama, Christopher Morahan, to write a special, one-off, 90 minute ghost story to be broadcast at 9.25pm on Christmas Day.

By this time, the ghost story had become a mainstay of BBC Christmas programming: a regular Christmas Eve anthology series, called *A Ghost Story for Christmas* had been established the year before. The Victorian lineage, which this connection between the Nativity and ghost fiction suggests, was made explicit by the channel's selection of M.R. James and Dickens stories. However, modern sociological ghost dramas were broadcast at other times of the year, such as *The Exorcism* directed by Don Taylor, in which the 1970s bourgeoisie are attacked by the ghost of a peasant.

In an interview with Andy Murray, Kneale implies that Morahan sought a narrative with a less conventional format, despite the fact that the commission was intended to fill a traditional slot. In response, Kneale proposed a 'ghost story with a twist, such as going at a ghost with science.'

The result, *The Stone Tape* concerns a group of research scientists working for a company called Ryan electronics. The company has recently renovated Taskerlands, a country house to be used as a research centre by the scientists, where they plan to devise new recording technologies. After their programmer, Jill, seems to have experienced a ghost, the team discover that the walls of a room in the house have acted as a recording medium, on which a Victorian maid's tragic death has been stored. The team leader, Peter, insists that they should try to exploit the stone tape; it might be the medium they were hoping to create. However, in his impatience, he accidentally wipes this high fidelity recording. Beneath it a deteriorated recording of a more distant past is revealed, indecipherable and thus far more horrific. Only Jill perceives this layer: she dies when she experiences its full manifestation.

Kneale's plot belongs to a hybrid sub-genre, which synthesises science fiction and the ghost story; ostensibly paranormal phenomena are rationalised by advanced science. Jill even seems to be a modern incarnation of the spiritual medium, as she is employed to act as a channel, collating data from each of the scientists and feeding it into the computer. Indeed, as has often been pointed out, *The Stone Tape* constitutes an extension of themes Kneale explored in 1958's *Quatermass and the Pit*, in which scientists discover that a pre-historic Martian invasion is to blame for ghostly phenomena, as well as 1963's *The Road*, in which Enlightenment empiricists in 1775 confront what appears to be a ghost, but is really a vision from the future of the horror produced by a nuclear war.

More specifically, Kim Newman has contextualised *The Stone Tape* in terms of its exorcism of a spirit using science rather than the Christian means of bell, book and candle. Newman traces the deployment of this theme back to Shirley Jackson's 1959 novel, *The Haunting of Hill House* and lists *The Poltergeist* as one of the more recent texts which have drawn on this particular synthesis of science fiction and ghost story.

There are three responses which we might offer to this typology of *The Stone Tape*. One is to historicise the science fiction exorcism on a broader timeline. The second response is to use textual analysis to problematise the connections between *The Stone Tape* and other science fiction ghost stories. The third is to theorise the programme's representation of space. I'll approach these one by one.

## **CLIP**

So, first: broad historicism. The machines in science fiction ghost stories tackle less the ghost than the mysticism surrounding the ghost. In this respect, *The Stone Tape*'s fictional scientists are the descendants of those phantasmagoria showmen of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, who would first frighten the audience with illusory ghosts, but ultimately reveal the magic lanterns which produced the illusions, exposing what they termed 'the baneful practices of impostors' – that is, those who claimed disingenuously to have found a ghost. The science of lantern technology would therefore replace mysticism as a spectacle. This is to some extent true of *The*

*Stone Tape*: its main televisual attraction is the spectacle of advanced electronic equipment used by the scientists, which the set designer borrowed from the BBC's own researchers. As with the phantasmagoria shows, this is not some kind of quasi-Brechtian exposure of the mechanics of a discourse, but the substitution of one attraction for another, by which the suspension of disbelief is strengthened rather than weakened.

The spectacle of technology is tightly sutured into *The Stone Tape*'s fiction. The most disturbing choreography, apart from the climax, appears when the misogynistic team leader, Peter, wields a phallic device which looks like a giant loud hailer. The abstract shapes which drive Jill to her death may be more horrifying, but even these are tacitly associated with the equipment. The decayed images of what we presume were humans are green, like the oscillograms prominent throughout the programme, in its opening titles and on the screens of various pieces of equipment used by the scientists. The colour green characterises both the haunted the room, which World War 2 soldiers painted khaki and Peter, who wears a green shirt in key scenes. The opening credits also create a link between the green oscillograms and the Radiophonic Workshop's electronic sound design, which is later used to provide the distorted noises of the ghost in the climax. Against these abstract images and sounds from the distant past and the advanced technologies of the present, the crisp, decipherable Victorian ghost stands isolated. This brings us to our second approach: the use of textual analysis to problematise the connections between *The Stone Tape* and other science fiction ghost stories.

As in most fictional exorcisms, the ghosts in the hybrid sub-genre to which *The Stone Tape* belongs are usually understood when their pasts are narrativised. At its most intense, the ghost is a synecdoche for its own life. It thus represents an alternative history, which the normative protagonist must come to understand. The horror of the ghost is often located in the difficulty of literalising this synecdoche. Once the protagonist knows the ghost's backstory, he or she will either successfully lay the ghost to rest or become its victim. The ongoing currency of the Victorian ghost story rests chiefly on its potential to make repressed, alternative histories knowable. However, in the science fiction ghost story sub genre it is mainly technology which is used to unfurl the alternative history represented synecdochically by the ghost.

Advanced science thus becomes associated with different modes of reading and articulating history.

*The Stone Tape* nods to the Victorian ghost story, in that its readable ghost is a Victorian maid. This ghost is explained not only by Jill's computer programme, but also by legible documents held by the trustees of the haunted house, such as records of a failed exorcism, as well as an Edwardian letter written by a child to Father Christmas.

*The Stone Tape* is unique, though, in that its climax hinges, not on a narratable ghost, but on the playback of a decayed recording; during the period in which a recording haunts the house, the stored information deteriorates. The result is a corrupted history, or what I would term 'dyschronia': that is, something discernible as an historical alterity, but irreducible to a discrete, coherent narrative.

Vague clues are given to us at the end: a computer read-out suggests that the stones in the steps are 7,000 years old. As Jill ascends them the last time, the background reverts to what looks like a stone circle. In his script, Kneale suggests a sacrifice, with the shapeless forms 'hunting' Jill 'with a brute male violence, a lust.' The scene has been realised by the special effects team even less concretely. The recording on the stone tape is no longer an isolable ghost, but a series of abstract signals redolent of oscillograms and associable with misogynistic malevolence only obliquely, in that they share the colour of Peter's shirt and that of the technology he and his male crew use. Advanced technology and ancient signals are implicitly linked as harmful by *The Stone Tape*.

On one level, therefore, we are clearly meant to associate the shapeless ghosts with Peter's mistreatment of Jill, who he has had an affair with and cruelly discarded. On the other hand, Jill's suffering seems in empathy with that of the Victorian ghost. Jill is the only member of the team who approaches the investigation with any conscience. When confronted by the recording of the Victorian ghost, she is horrified not by the phenomenon itself, but, as she tells Peter, of the possibility that the ghost has self-awareness – that it knows it has nothing to do but relive the worst moment of its life. The ultimate horror for Jill, though, is the unreadable, unknowable shapeless

recording she witnesses at the end, with which empathy would be impossible. Compare this with, say, Don Taylor's 1972 programme, *The Exorcism*, to which I referred earlier. Taylor's innovations notwithstanding, *The Exorcism's* climax is traditional, in that it consists of the ghost relating its history and death. It is this extended metadiegesis which leads to the protagonists' deaths in *The Exorcism*. In contrast it is dyschronia, the irreversible loss of historical clarity, which kills Jill at the end of *The Stone Tape*.

In what light can we put *The Stone Tape's* negotiation of affect and technology? Nigel Kneale first came to prominence when he won the 1950 Somerset Maugham prize for a collection of short stories, *Tomato Cain*. The collection includes a story called 'Enderby and the Sleeping Beauty.' A British soldier, lost and hallucinating in the desert, stumbles into a pyramid. There he finds the statue of a beautiful woman. He proceeds to kiss the statue, which then seems to move: in fact an automatic booby trap has been sprung. Like Indiana Jones at the start of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, he has to flee the pyramid as spikes appear from the floor, walls and ceiling. Though Kneale provides us with a rational explanation for what happens, we also share the soldier's subjective impressions. He immediately feels guilty for kissing the statue, as he is a married man. On one level, the statue is as real as he imagines it, as he brings punishment on himself for a brief lapse of fidelity to his wife.

Likewise, even though the ghost in *The Stone Tape* is rationalised as a recording, Jill is saddened when Peter accidentally wipes it: she has lost her object of empathy. For Kneale, subjectivity transcends rationalism. A character's empathy with ghosts, here as elsewhere, depends on the spatial context. To come to our third approach, a consideration of space, we can invoke Foucault's notion of heterotopias, other spaces which are a form of storage. Foucault wrote of heterotopias of crisis and of deviation. The other space of the haunted house is a heterotopia of crisis in two senses, firstly in that the ghost relives the crisis of its death and secondly in that the haunted protagonist undergoes a transformative experience in the house.

In *The Stone Tape*, the work place and the heterotopia are juxtaposed within the house. In Taskerlands house, the scientists have their workplace as well as the haunted room. The workplace is full of equipment. The haunted room is intended to

be a storage facility for what was in 1972 necessarily huge computer banks. However, because of the ghost, no renovation work can continue on the room. What is intended as a space of storage for the artefacts of science fiction thus remains a haunted space, filled with phantasms. The use of the room is contested by the technologically informed scientists and the ghost, a contest between the normative use of space and space as heterotopia. The one clear characteristic of the space as constituted at the climax, as Jill climbs the stairs/monolith, is that it was a stone circle: an ancient heterotopia.

Kneale was inspired in his creation of Taskerlands - the country house renovated to be a research centre - by the BBC's own Kingswood Warren research centre in Surrey. The house used to portray the exterior of Taskerlands is Ockham Park, also in Surrey. Ockham Park is at once a Victorian gothic fantasy and, by association with its most famous inhabitant, Augusta Ada Lovelace, also a place of rationalism. Lovelace is famous for her description of Charles Babbage's prototypical computer, the analytical engine. *The Stone Tape's* opposition between futuristic rationalism and atavistic horror is therefore embodied by, respectively, the building's associations and its façade.

The fictional name of the house – Taskerlands is explained in the programme. The house was owned by a man named Tasker and these were his lands. Tasker sounds like an unpleasant man, if not literally a slave driver. It is significant that the victim on his estate was a servant, rather than a member of the family. The history of the house as the characters recount it is one of attempted colonisation of an alien space: there have been two failed exorcisms; during the second world war, American soldiers occupy the building, but seem to have also been bothered by the ghost. Now, a large electronics company, Ryan attempts to take over the space and turn it into a research centre. It needs a research centre to create technologies which will reclaim the market from the Japanese. However, the company does not succeed in turning the haunted room into a computer storage room.

The only thing which successfully colonises the space is paradoxically that which perpetuates its status as a heterotopia: a horrified individual, an outsider to the

colonisation process. At the end of *The Stone Tape*, it is the recording of Jill's death which fills the room, not Ryan electronics' equipment.

If we link together our three threads, we can define the role of dyschronia in Kneale's narrative.

Firstly, as *The Stone Tape* is a science fiction ghost story, scientific technology is used to decipher the ghost. In this way technology replaces the legible Victorian ghost as televisual spectacle.

Secondly: ultimately more spectacular is the dyschronia – a level of ancient history which cannot be read by the technology. This dyschronia is abstract, yet, similar in appearance to the spectacle of technology and therefore obliquely redolent of the misogyny with which Pete treats Jill throughout the programme.

Thirdly, the contest of spaces suggests dyschronia's discursive function: dyschronia embodies in abstract form the manifestation in time immemorial of the violent and obsessive occupation of other spaces. Dyschronia can be connected with the upper class repression implicit in the Victorian ghost story and with the capitalism of the electronic age, yet it is an abstraction of the horror of these forms. Dyschronia in *The Stone Tape* implies a narrative failure in political history to account for the continuity between the present and pre-historical. At the same time, the atavism of this abstract horror is shown to produce in the face of its future manifestations, voices of defiance: those legible ghosts, such as the Victorian maid and Jill.

In *The Stone Tape* Nigel Kneale uses science fiction to create links between atavistic and futuristic abstract signs. In this way, he suggests the failure of political history to account for ongoing horrors older than history. He also implies that this failure, as embodied by the shapelessness of dyschronia, can lead to clearly defined voices of defiance.