



The Gaze of the Spectral Setting in the 1968 BBC Adaptation of M. R. James's “Oh, Whistle, and I’ll Come to You, My Lad”

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Abstract

This article is a study devoted to the BBC adaptation of a ghost story by Montague Rhodes James, “Oh, Whistle and I’ll Come to You, My Lad.” The ideas of the spectral gaze and sympathetic spectreship are used to submit that in the film the setting itself is the spectre, with which/whom the viewer is invited to identify. This rearrangement—in comparison with the situation in the original story—casts the spectral setting both in the role of the haunting presence and the victim of an otherworldly (human) intrusion. A detailed analysis of the use of the camera supports the argument.

Keywords: ghost story genre; film adaptation; haunting; gaze; identification.

Introduction: The Gaze, the Haunting House, and Sympathetic Spectreship

“The gaze” is a popular term in contemporary film theory. “Male gaze” has been used to describe the position of superiority of a perceiving subject, gendered male, over a perceived object, gendered female. In a typical film-viewing situation, this perceptive empowerment—as we might call it—is a source of aberrant, sadistic pleasure; the camera is the instrument used to provide it. In a summary of this theory as propounded by Christian Metz, Sue Thornham explains that “the all-powerful gaze of the camera” “offers its viewer a powerful and eroticised gaze.” “Cinema’s voyeuristic pleasures,” she goes on to say, “are therefore both more sadistic and more fetishized” (1999, p. 54). The concept of the gaze has been adapted both inside and outside of film theory, for example in gender studies, post-colonial studies, and critical race theory. What these diverse interpretations have in common is the idea of the dominance of the perceiver over the perceived, as when Laura Mulvey

describes the female figure represented by the camera as placed as or reduced to an “exhibitionist”: “women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*” (Mulvey, 1999, pp. 62–63; italics in the original). The same is true in the case of the spectral gaze, a term which has begun to gain currency in film studies and within the emerging interdisciplinary fields of hauntology and spectrality studies: it dominates the on-screen victims of haunting, showing them at their most vulnerable, and enables the viewer to participate in all the voyeurism and sadism associated with cinematic gazing.

The spectral gaze offers especially interesting features within the type of ghost film whose concern can be described as the “haunting house,” where the film’s “ghost” is in fact an entire spectral terrain infused with an omnipresent supernatural presence; hence the term *haunting*, rather than *haunted*, house.¹ Haunting houses on film may be created in various ways, the most common being simply to demonstrate through the plot that the setting of the film is itself a supernatural presence. For example, a setting may seem to actively work to discourage the human protagonists from remaining there, as in *The Amityville Horror*, or simply to terrorize and kill them, as in *The Blair Witch Project*. More interesting for a discussion around the spectral gaze, however, are films in which the spectral setting is established primarily by the action of the camera. In such films, point-of-view shots and other camera techniques are used to assign a spectral consciousness, with its own subjective gaze, to the terrain itself. Walls, trees, gravestones, furniture, and so on seem to watch the protagonist, and the viewer experiences much, if not all, of the film through the eyes of this spectral setting. Such is the case in the BBC’s 1968 adaptation of Montague Rhodes James’s “Oh, Whistle and I’ll Come to You, My Lad,” where the moody gaze of the spectral setting colours the viewer’s experience of the narrative every bit as strongly as the chatty, ironical narrator of James’s original story.²

M. R. James, a recognised classic of the ghostly tale, was sensitive to how decisions on visual information and spectator identification impact the reader’s experience of a literary haunting. In texts that accompany his stories, he enumerates aesthetic criteria for the

¹ The spectral setting of a *haunting* house film does not, of course, have to be an actual house, although many, like Obayashi’s 1977 *House* and Rosenberg’s *The Amityville Horror*, of the same year, are; Kubrick’s 1980 *The Shining* and Myrick and Sanchez’s 1999 *The Blair Witch Project* both feature spectral settings out-of-doors. The *haunting* house film is distinct (though indeed, sometimes not so distinct) from the more familiar *haunted* house film, where the “ghost” is a discrete supernatural entity appearing/trespassing in the everyday world of the “natural,” as in the BBC’s 1980 production of *Hamlet*.

² The strategy of using the camera to establish the spectrality of the setting may be used to various degrees within a film. For example, some *haunting* house films, such as Raimi’s 1981 *The Evil Dead*, use camerawork at times establishing and reinforcing the spectral gaze of the setting, and at other times establishing other perspectives, such as those of the characters, or an impersonal third-person. Some, like *Blair Witch*, prioritize the characters’ point of view and exclude the gaze of the spectral setting altogether. The BBC’s adaptation of “Whistle” represents the far end of the spectrum when it comes to camerawork’s role in the creation of the spectral setting, with nearly every shot reinforcing its first-person perspective.

haunted tale: visual reticence in the portrayal of the ghost; a gradual introduction of the spectre into the narrative, until the growing strength of its presence culminates in a “final flash or stab of horror” (James, 2009, p. 351); the necessity for sympathetic identification by the reader with the victim of the haunting; and the intention to make the reader feel “pleasantly uncomfortable,” as though, “If I’m not very careful, something of this kind may happen to me” (James, 2009, pp. 337–338).³ His short story “Oh Whistle, and I’ll Come to You, My Lad” (1904) fully embodies these criteria. Visual representations of the ghost gain suggestive power by leaving much to the imagination, and the ghost is introduced in such a manner as to gradually diminish the possibility of it being “explained away.” The human victim—or, as James terms him, the “patient” of the haunting (2009, p. 340)—is young, bookish, highly skeptical of the supernatural, and a bit too curious for his own good: a character type that would have been easy to sympathize with for James’s original audiences of Cambridge students. The sense of “pleasant uneasiness” grows, and the eventual crescendo, when the protagonist finally comes “face to face” with the ghost, is used to great effect. James’s artistic success in this story may be the reason why “Oh, Whistle” remains one of his most popular, and why it would inspire the best-known film adaptation of his work.

The 1968 BBC adaptation is a remarkable study. Highly faithful to the original James in terms of the plot, the methodical application of conventional camera techniques such as the obstructed shot, the wide angle shot, the tracking shot, the pan, and the point-of-view shot are used to create a visual commentary on the narrative wholly absent from the original text. Therefore, in our analysis of the film, we first offer a close-reading of this adaptation, outlining how the action of the camera makes the viewer a participant in the gaze of the spectral setting. We argue that the use of the spectral gaze to associate the viewer with the spectral setting, a “sympathetic spectreship” of sorts,⁴ complicates James’s original interpretations of the significance of ghosts and haunting, and problematizes the very concept of the gaze by subverting the privilege traditionally accorded to the gazer even while it emphasizes the voyeurism and sadism inherent in all forms of the gaze. Sympathetic spectreship places the viewer in an uneasy position, the position of one who is both a participant in the spectre’s plight (which in this case has to do with the intrusion of

³ For an illustration of the relevance of James’s criteria for very recent inflections of supernatural horror in film see J. Mydla, “Old-Type Hauntings by New Ghosts? Word and Image in the ‘Cybernatural Horror’ *Unfriended*” (2017).

⁴ We have coined this term as an allusion to the concept of “sympathetic spectatorship,” itself the subject of much discussion in studies of Gothic literature and film. Sympathetic spectatorship has been nicely summarized by Simon Hay as a reader’s “sympathetic engagement with suffering” through a text. Says Hay, “sympathy . . . begins with imaginative identification: we imagine ourselves into the identity of a wronged or wounded person, and respond as if we were in their shoes” (Hay, 2011, p. 34). In ghost fiction, the identification traditionally takes place between the reader/viewer of the ghost literature/film and the human “patient” (as James would put it) of the haunting. However, in cases where the spectre itself is the “patient,” our term “sympathetic spectreship” specifies identification between reader/viewer and spectre. For a recent discussion on “sympathetic spectatorship,” see J. Mydla, “Joanna Baillie’s Dramatic Experiments with Strong Passions in the Light of the Idea of Sympathetic Spectatorship” (2016).

James's protagonist into the spectral setting) and the perpetrator of the haunting at the centre of the ghost story. In other words, as a participant in the first-person gaze of the spectral setting, the viewer finds herself both the subject and the object of haunting.

The Camera in the Service of the Spectral Gaze

The camerawork in "Whistle" is responsible in great part for establishing the spectral gaze and its intimate relationship to the viewer. Other filmic elements, especially sound, also contribute; however, this paper focuses on the visual contributions of the camera, first because they are sufficient to prove the integral role of the spectral gaze in the overall scheme of the adaptations, and second, because James's critical concerns when it comes to his own ghostly creations are primarily visual. This section will discuss how common camera techniques, like the obstructed shot, the wide shot, the tracking shot, the pan, and the point-of-view shot work together to create the quality of "peering," overlooking, and spying on the protagonist; these haunting qualities comprise the gaze of the spectral setting, in which the viewer participates. It goes without saying that, taken each by itself, or used only once or twice, these techniques would not be enough to create the gaze of the spectral setting. After all, the techniques are used in nearly all films and, in the vast majority of them, they are used for purposes other than to create the gaze of a spectral setting. However, they are used so methodically and so frequently in this adaptation that the result is the creation of the spectral setting and its gaze.

One of the most distinctive motifs in "Whistle" is the obstructed shot, which creates the sense of a spectral consciousness, furtively watching the protagonist, from the very first moments. The camera consistently views Parkin from behind something else⁵: early on, we see him entering a car, dwarfed first by the headlight, then by the side panel, and then by the driver, steering wheel, and front seat (2:26–2:50). To name a few more obstructions out of many: as the film progresses we see Parkin from behind a bed (6:42–7:00), the back of a dressing-table mirror (8:26), dining table settings (12:31), gravestones overgrown with brambles (15:06–15:24), a mass of bones and roots protruding from an eroded grave about to slide down a cliff (16:25–16:45), bedposts (19:58–20:35), grasses (26:15–26:48), and wooden shore-constructions known as groynes (30:47–30:58). Some of these obstructions, like the mirror, the table settings, the bedposts, the grasses, and the groynes, become motifs that occur three or more times throughout the course of the film. The repetition of obstructed shots contributes to a growing impression that whatever is behind the gaze represented by the camera wishes not to be seen, an impression that is reinforced by the fact that the camera is frequently moving in these shots in order to remain hidden. For example, a shot of Parkin at his dressing table, partially obscured by the back of the mirror, becomes even more obscured when the camera tracks left to include not more of Parkin, but of the back of the mirror (8:25), as though its gaze were that of a conscious entity making doubly

⁵ James's Parkins, the protagonist and the "patient" of the haunting in the original.

sure that it will not be seen by the protagonist.⁶ Besides repetition and movement, the variety of angles and locations for obstructed shots creates a sense of spectral omniscience: a sense of a gaze belonging to the walls, to the dunes, to the beach—in short, to a spectral setting, rather than a discrete spectre or other source. This setting does not have to “follow after” Parkin, because it is already there, wherever he is. At a critical moment when, in a dream too real to be just a dream, Parkin hops over a groyne to escape a menacing spectral pursuer, the pattern has already been established: there can be no hiding place for Parkin on the other side of anything, because the camera/spectre/viewer is already there (31:21).



Figure 1. Obstructed shot becoming more obstructed from 8:21 to 8:25.

Another type of shot used to create the gazing spectral setting in “Whistle” is the very wide shot. In such a shot, Parkin is out in the open, whether on the dunes or on the beach, his far-away form dwarfed by the landscape. Very wide shots are either combined with obstruction (13:35–14:00) or not (14:00–14:19), but the result is the same: the feeling that Parkin is being stalked by something that is not human. That the gaze is coming from the land itself is established when very wide shots start and end without Parkin as the main focus, communicating that the gaze predates his presence and will outlast it. For example, at 24:48 we cut to a shot of an old stone bridge. Parkin is not in the shot. When he enters,

⁶ This impression of furtiveness, caution, and stalking establishes the “personality” of a first-person presence and eliminates the possibility of third-person distance in these shots. Moreover, the first-person presence established cannot be a human, for two reasons: one, it would simply be impossible for a human to get into many of these positions; and two, we are at times shown in one shot the very area from which the subjective spectral gaze had just been emanating, empty of other sources of perspective besides that of the spectral setting. For example, the mirror-back shot of Parkin at his dressing table shows us the same part of his room that had just been “gazing” at him a moment before he sat down (7:24–8:09), empty of any possible spectator besides the spectral setting that has already been/is being established by the camera. In fact, what the mirror-back shot shows is that the origin of the gaze from 7:24–8:09 is the very bed whose sheets will later terrorize Parkin; many shots of Parkin in his room originate here.

framed by the arch of the bridge, his form is already far enough away to be somewhat indistinct; he proceeds to walk in the opposite direction from the camera until he shrinks almost to invisibility. The shot lingers for almost an entire minute, ceasing at 25:42, far past the point of interest in terms of wondering what Parkin will *do*; the interest exists in the sense of his obliviousness to this watching presence. A similarly lingering very wide shot is used in the context of the shore: we cut to the vast beach, empty of human presence until Parkin's foot comes down in front of the camera. He proceeds to walk away from the camera until he is dwarfed by the sky and sand (13:16–13:38). The long duration of the shot and the simplicity of Parkin's movement again place the interest not on him and what he will do, but on the tension created by the gaze of the spectral presence itself.



Figure 2. A very wide shot at 13:31.

Both the obstructed shot and the very wide shot are frequently combined with movement in the form of tracking shots and pans, which create the impression of an eye following a subject, and sometimes even of stepping to one side to avoid attention or to get a better view. Indeed, tracking shots and pans, as the primary types of camera movement in “Whistle,” are important contributors to the overall “personality” of the spectral environment, not only because of what they *are*—short (only a couple of inches or feet at a time, as at 2:28–2:32,) and medium-speed (about the same speed as a person would turn her head to follow the progress of an interesting object, as at 16:00–16:10)—but because of what they are *not*. Neither, for example, is a high-speed steadicam seeking the protagonist with the avidity of a demon, as in *The Evil Dead*. In “Whistle,” tracking shots and pans are deliberate and cautious, with an ongoing curiosity implied through repetition. When paired with the obstructed shot, the track or pan lends the sense of a presence secretly watching from close range, as in the mirror-back shot. When paired with the wide shot, distance supplies the shelter that at close range is supplied by obstruction, and the sense of watching gains in boldness, as at 13:35–14:00.

Most important of all in establishing the spectral gaze of the setting is the point-of-view shot—because, when the obstructed shot, wide shot, the tracking shot, and the pan are combined and deployed in so methodical a fashion, the end result is that they *all* become point-of-view shots. So strong is the resulting sense of subjectivity that even shots which, taken outside the context of the overall cinematic scheme, would never seem like point-of-view shots on their own, are given that cast by the sheer weight of the precedent set by previous, and reinforced by subsequent, shots (for example, when Parkin hops over the groyne in his dream).⁷ This is the essence of the gaze of the spectral environment: a presence that is more than the sum of its parts; for the pattern, once established, takes on a life of its own in the mind, and the gaze, of the viewer.⁸

The Adaptation in View of the Gaze and of M.R. James's Aesthetic of Literary Ghostliness

We have seen that, due to the actions of the camera, the ghost in “Whistle” is no longer, as in the original, a solitary spectre, foreign to the human world, but is, in fact, the very setting of the film itself. We have also seen that the viewer is strongly identified with this spectral setting, spends the duration of the film witnessing the protagonist from the spectre's point of view, and also, through the mechanism of the gaze, participates in the spectre's terrorizing of the protagonist. Inquiring how these fundamental changes impact our understanding of the film as an adaptation of James allows us to examine some conceptual ramifications of the differences in the respective aesthetics. We will also examine how assigning the gaze to the spectral environment calls viewer privilege into question, even as it heightens the sadism and voyeurism characteristic of all forms of the gaze.

Let us first look at a criterion of James's directly touching upon the issue of spectator identification. According to James, his ghost stories must make his reader identify with the “patient” of the haunting, by which he means the human protagonist (James, 2009, pp. 339–340).

⁷ “Still” shots, in particular, add to the sense of subjectivity by never being completely still. The camera always shakes slightly, implying the motion of a first-person gazer. The shot from 20:10–20:25 is one “still” shot out of dozens with this slight shake.

⁸ Another reason the shots discussed above are so effective for establishing the sense of furtive watching could be that they draw from pre-established patterns in camerawork associated with surveillance and paparazzi, two themes that were popular in New Wave films of the time like *Peeping Tom* (Powell, 1960), *La Dolce Vita* (Fellini, 1960), and *Blowup* (Antonioni, 1966), where they often really *are* used as point-of-view shots—the point of view of an onscreen character looking at the scene through the lens of a camera. The BBC's “Whistle,” (along with other BBC adaptation of the stories, e.g. “A Warning to the Curious”) capitalizes effectively on these associations to create the impression of an omnipresent spectral gaze in which the viewer takes part. It may be interesting to look for connections between the rise of haunting house films, the use of camera techniques invoking surveillance, and public anxieties around increasing surveillance in public and private life during the nineteen-sixties, seventies, and eighties. In the years after “Whistle,” films like Coppola's *The Conversation* (1974) and Radford's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1984) would feature settings which, even if they cannot truly be called spectral, are endowed with an omnipresent awareness similar enough to that in “Whistle” (and other haunting house films) for the parallel to warrant further attention.

It is through such identification that the haunting gains its power to unnerve. This criterion is borne out fully in the text of the original, where the creation of the feeling of unease depends on reader identification with the overly-curious and imprudently skeptical Parkins. In the adaptation, however, the action of the camera identifies the viewer with the spectral setting, rather than with Parkin. Established as an omnipresence whose personality and point of view dominate the film and the viewer's experience of the plot, the setting-as-spectre cannot really be said to be "otherworldly." Instead, it is the protagonist who enters from outside the boundaries of the film's "world" and transgresses the norms of that world. Moreover, the viewer's participation in the point of view of the spectral setting allows her to sympathetically experience the spectral consciousness undergoing that transgression, which may be described as the appropriation of a part of the spectral setting, the whistle, by the otherworldly intruder, the human. In this sense, James's dictate that the viewer identify with the "patient" of the haunting is still carried out by the adaptation, but with a key difference: the patient is no longer the human protagonist, but the spectral setting itself.

Complicated by this shift of emphasis to the spectral experience is James's concept of reticence, or economy of vision. The original "Whistle" follows James's dictate that "[r]eticence may be an elderly doctrine to preach, yet from the artistic point of view I am sure it is a sound one. Reticence conduces to effect, blatancy ruins it . . ." (James, 2009, p. 347). On the surface, it may seem like the adaptation is faithful to James on the point of reticence. After all, we cannot get a definitive sense of what the spectre looks like. But there is a key difference: in the adaptation, the spectre is *us*. This is an altogether different form of uneasiness than that created in the original, where the unknowable is still external. The viewer of the adaptation, through identification with the spectral gaze, has been made uncanny. The viewer might even be said to undergo a type of violence by this symbolic regression to a state of development prior to Lacan's mirror stage, although to elaborate on this point would be beyond the scope of the current paper.⁹ Finally, the sense of spectre/self created by the camera's movement is enhanced—made, ironically, more "real," more complete—by the sense of incompleteness, of unknowability, of unseeability. Thus, the anxiety which in James is created by a threat from an external menace, incompletely seen and known, is updated to the more modern horror of an existential threat coming from inside, and relating to the unknowability, or even the unreality, of the self.

Similarly updated is James's stipulation that ghosts be introduced gradually into a story. In James, ghosts often initially appear through phenomena that are easy to explain away: the ghost in the original "Whistle" is first manifested through ambiguous elements like dreams, a shadowy figure on a beach, and signs of disturbance in a bed that was not supposed to have been slept in. Gradually, the evidence mounts, until the protagonist, in the

⁹ There seems to be a connection between the Lacanian mirror stage and the gaze. Anneke Smelik writes: "Mulvey explains narcissistic visual pleasure with Lacan's concepts of ego formation and the mirror stage. There is an analogy between the way in which the child derives pleasure from the identification with a perfect mirror image and forms its ego ideal on the basis of this idealized image, and the way in which the film spectator derives narcissistic pleasure from identifying with the perfected image of a human figure on the screen" (Smelik, 1998, p. 10; for a debate see Copjec, 1994, p. 30 ff).

Jamesian “final flash or stab of horror,” experiences something that he cannot explain away (though the possibility, however slight, is left to the reader.) In the adaptation, this scheme is done away with, as the spectral setting is introduced from the beginning through the methodical application of the camera techniques discussed above. However, the sense of the gradualness of the introduction of the ghost remains, because the viewer detects only gradually—if, indeed, at all—the presence of the spectral gaze in which she takes part. This is due in part to the fact that camerawork is part of what phenomenologists like Husserl would call “hyletic” data: information of the kind viewers look *through* in order to perceive a depicted object (Casebier, 1991, p. 13).¹⁰ However, once the viewer has had the “flash” of insight and noticed the activity of the camera as it creates the gaze of the spectral setting, it becomes difficult or even impossible to “unsee” it—perhaps an appropriate outcome for one who has noticed the presence of a spectre.

Assigning the spectral gaze to the spectral setting results in the rise of two characteristics that distinguish the gaze in “Whistle” from other manifestations of the gaze. First, the voyeurism and sadism characteristic of all forms of the gaze (Male, Imperial, Spectral, etc.) are heightened in “Whistle” when camerawork puts the viewer into the first-person position of the spectral setting. Take, for example, the impact of this identification on James’s “final flash or stab of horror” (the moment when his protagonist and reader encounter the ghost “face to face”). The flash of horror is still there in the adaptation, but with a key difference: when the viewer and the ghost share the same point of view, the horror that we witness in Parkin, we also seem to cause. For contrast, consider *The Blair Witch Project*, which falls on the opposite side of the spectrum of spectre/protagonist identification in that the substance of the film is made up entirely of shots from a camera held by the protagonists, creating a sense of experiencing the protagonists’ horror through their eyes. Thus, though part of the pleasure of the film may indeed be a sadistic satisfaction in our voyeuristic power over the protagonists in their vulnerable, horrified state, we are not involved with *creating* that horror in the same way we are with “Whistle,” where the camerawork forces us to experience the protagonist’s horror almost solely from the spectre’s perspective.¹¹ The viewer not only experiences Parkin’s horror vicariously, simply by seeing it, as in *Blair Witch* and other horror films; in “Whistle,” the viewer is made a co-author of that horror through her participation in the first-person gaze of the spectre. The sadistic

¹⁰ Other examples of hyletic data are colour, palette, editing techniques, soundtrack, and so on.

¹¹ The forty-two-minute film contains only two shots (eight seconds total) that can confidently be said to be from Parkin’s point of view (6:36–6:41 and 34:09–34:12), and it also has several shots which at first seem like they could be from Parkin’s point of view, but are immediately shown not to be when he enters them. For example, one shot that at first could be construed as a Parkin-POV shot has Parkin at his desk making a rubbing of the inscription on the whistle. But this shot is shown to be an over-the-shoulder close-up when the side of Parkin’s face enters at the upper-right (18:46). Moreover, throughout the shot, the camera shakes and zooms slowly closer, implying another instance of the curiosity of the spectral setting. A second example is at the climactic moment of haunting, when the bed sheets rise out of the bed. One slightly shaky “still” shot from 40:03–40:05 seems to imply Parkin’s point of view. But a return to the same shot at 40:08 disproves the implication when Parkin runs into the frame. This pattern of implication/refutation is repeated in different settings throughout the film.

and voyeuristic qualities of the spectral gaze are thereby enhanced in “Whistle” and, we would hypothesize, in other horror films where camerawork marries the viewer’s participation in the spectral gaze to a first-person experience of the spectral setting.



Figure 3. Horror from the spectral point-of-view at 40:03 (POV of the haunted bed) and 40:26 (mirror-back shot).

Further complicating the relationship of the spectral gaze in “Whistle” to other types of gazes is the question of how the power privilege of the viewer-gazer is affected in situations where 1) the viewer is identified with the first-person gaze of the spectral setting, and 2) the spectral setting is intruded upon by a human protagonist during the course of the film (the reversal of the “patient” relationship discussed above). The viewer of “Whistle” not only experiences the elements of haunting/gazing that embody the perceptive empowerment of all forms of the gaze; she is also, throughout the film, exposed to the experience of *being* a spectral setting subjected to the intrusion of the protagonist. In such circumstances the first-person gaze of the spectre is characterized not only by the power of the gaze over its subject (the human protagonist) but by the violation of that power through the protagonist’s manipulation of the gazing spectral setting and, by extension, the viewer. Thus, the privilege traditionally accorded to the gazer (“I can subject you to something, but you can’t subject me to anything”) is called into question.

Conclusion: A More Modern Horror

As mentioned above, James maintained that the goal in his stories was to make the reader feel “pleasantly uncomfortable,” a state of mind stemming from the idea that “something of this kind may happen to me” (James, 2009, p. 338). The sense of unease is still present in the adaptation, but it is decidedly less pleasant. For one thing, James’s chummy and sarcastic narrator has been replaced by the moody gaze of the spectral environment. For another, the question, “what if such a thing should happen to me?” takes on a different

character when the “me” in question is no longer the human “patient” of a ghostly haunting, but the ghostly victim of a human intrusion and the appropriation of ancient artefacts. The basic question that spooks the reader of the original, “What if I should be visited by a ghost?” becomes, in the adaptation, “What if I should *be* a ghost?” And further: “What if I should someday find myself in the position of this spectral environment—invisible, vulnerable, subject to invasion by others, and always unseeable/unknowable to myself?”; “What if I should be made to suffer the trespassing of a foreign presence into my territory, and become subject to the appropriation, and perhaps desecration, of my possessions?”; “What if I should become an agent of fear and violence to others, though my motivation may seem justified?” And even, “What if one or more of these things are already happening?”¹²

These questions belong to the postwar, postcolonial, postmodern world, a world that James never knew. His ghosts emerge from the past, recalled into the present through the violation of artefacts connected with bygone days. The BBC’s “Whistle” is an important moment in ghost-story telling for its stark illustration of the massive ideological and aesthetic transitions between the time of James and that of the BBC adaptation: in only a little over half a century, ghosts have gone from *haunting* us, to *being* us. The fear is no longer of what may return from the distant past; no ghost could ever equal the horrors, or, perhaps even more chilling, the contradictions of life in the present.

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¹² Similar modern anxieties of not realizing the fact of one’s own spectrality would be made more explicit, even acted out, in *The Sixth Sense* (1999).

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