

## Small screen psychics

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## **Small Screen Psychics: Television Performance as Dubious Achievement**

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### **Abstract**

The recent growth of interest in television performance has resulted in an array of books and articles which, in turn, have provided this area of study with renewed depth and breadth.

Many of these contributions share an interest in questions of achievement, utilising this term as a means of emphasising the value in analysing performers' contributions to the style and meaning of television texts. This article evaluates that critical tendency and uses it as a platform to consider instances in which achievement in television performance may also represent a deceptive or ethically dubious endeavour. The discussion builds to an analysis of television 'mediums' – individuals who pretend they are receiving messages from the dead – as a means of articulating the ways in which performance can showcase an impressive range of skills and, at the same time, contain fundamental deceptions or obfuscations. As a result, notions of performance achievement may involve complex and even conflicting evaluations.

### **Keywords**

Performance; aesthetics; the paranormal; genre; ethics; criticism.

It surely will not have escaped the notice of anyone possessing even a casual interest in television studies that the subjects of acting and performance have benefited from a surge of critical attention in recent years. The period between 2016 and 2019 alone provided monographs by Richard Hewett (2017) and Tom Cantrell and Christopher Hogg (2017), edited collections by Cantrell and Hogg (2019) and Lucy Fife Donaldson and James Walters (2019), as well as themed issues of *Journal of Film and Video*, edited by Justin Owen Rawlins and R. Colin Tait (2016), and *Critical Studies in Television*, edited by Simon Knox and Stephen Lacey (2018a). As we might expect, the methods and approaches employed in these various publications are wide-ranging, including the integration of actor interviews with critical analysis (Cantrell and Hogg 2017; Cassidy and Knox 2018, 2019), the closer appreciation of acting within historical and industrial contexts (Hewett 2017, 2018; McNaughton 2018), an emphasis upon the work of acting doubles (Shacklock 2016), and even evaluations of non-human performance (Bignell 2019). Despite the diverse appearance of these contrasting standpoints, certain rhetorical synergies can be traced between them. Many of the writers, for example, note the relative neglect of television acting and performance in academic debate in the years prior to publication (Cantrell and Hogg 2018: 3; Knox and Lacey 2018b: 257; Fife Donaldson and Walters 2019: 7) and, in the process, acknowledge the influence on their work of John Caughie's article 'What Do Actors Do When They Act?' (2000), which proposed a focus on television performance that wasn't necessarily taken up with consistency across the discipline. In this way, the various contributions to the debate can be read as asserted responses to a perceived lack of attention that, by implication, each author or editor took to be an oversight.

At the heart of these efforts is the uncontroversial contention, shared by each scholar, that performers contribute substantially to the style, tone, and impact of the television programme in which they feature: they are significant elements. None of the books, chapters

or articles devote extensive time to discussing performances that do *not* contribute in this way. On the contrary, a number concentrate on examples in which a performer's work might be underestimated or missed either because their labour is 'invisible' (Shacklock 2016: 69), the programme in which they appear does not correspond with critical notions of 'quality' (Cardwell 2019: 23) or even because they present a challenge to traditional notions of performance (Clayton 2019: 152-53). Emphasising the accomplishments of television acting and performance makes sense as a means of justifying the need to devote time at all to an area that had received relatively little prior attention: not simply because it hadn't been looked at very much but because it is *worth* looking at. All of the writing about television acting and performance within that three-year period therefore possess a shared focus on achievement and, often, the close relationship that exists between the achievement of performers and the achievement of the programmes in which they feature. In this way, the crop of books and articles have interests in common with equivalent work in film studies and, particularly, Andrew Klevan's *Film Performance: From Achievement to Appreciation* (2005), which a number of authors give mention to (Shacklock 2016: 71; Cantrell and Hogg 2017: 1; Fife Donaldson and Walters 2019: 17). Klevan distinguishes his work from previous studies that had focussed on stardom or traditional notions of acting, explaining that 'This book places the emphasis differently, treating performance as an internal element of style in synthesis with other aspects of film style and explores the achievement of expressive rapport' (Klevan 2005: ii). In this account, the performer is understood to be an integral element within a film's aesthetic composition and to its dramatic aims. Therefore, achievement is evaluated in the context of that relationship.

We can identify traces of this approach in some examples of work on television performance that appeared prior to the post-2016 surge in publications. Essays in Christine Cornea's 2010 edited collection *Genre and Performance: Film and Television*, for example,

enjoy an affinity with the rhetoric of Klevan's position to varying degrees. Steven Peacock's chapter, for example, evaluates Ian McShane's performance of Al Swearengen in *Deadwood* (2004-06):

McShane carefully toys with breaking (through) a staunchly observable principle of filmed dramatic performance. As he lays down his head and tale, his eyes come close to fixing the camera with a piercing gaze; the actor encroaches on 'talking heads' territory by threatening to rupture the fictional world's intrinsic workings in delivering a direct address. Yet, crucially, the gesture of acknowledgement is only partially achieved; one eye remains bruised and swollen, and glares a little off-centre. The other flits and skims the camera's own eye, taunting in directness. (Peacock 2010: 105)

Here, Peacock devotes specific attention to the often-intricate ways in which performers can work to enrich the aesthetic composition of the shows in which they feature. Key decisions, such as interacting precisely with the camera to create ambiguous direct address, help to create levels of narrative complexity within the programme. As a consequence, the actor's contribution becomes pivotal within the show's success, woven into the fabric of its overall accomplishments. It is not difficult to relate the claims made by Peacock to the critical concepts of synthesis and expressive rapport articulated in Klevan's approach to performance. These interests can also be found in James Bennett's 2011 book, *Television Personalities: Stardom and the Small Screen*. Writing about television chef Jamie Oliver, Bennett observes that:

Jamie is seemingly constantly in and out of the fridge or oven, moving around the kitchen or bashing saucepans or ingredients across the work surface. Performance becomes a pleasure of the programme because of the apparent energy, and fun, with which cooking is demonstrated – a far cry from the staid delivery of Delia Smith or Fanny Craddock. Movement is, however, largely stressed via the handheld camera which, rather than cut to close-ups that might emphasise the cookery techniques involved, zooms in and out of the action, frames and reframes Oliver as he points to ingredients and moves around the kitchen. (Bennett 2011: 132)

Bennett evaluates performance achievement within the context of factual entertainment but places an emphasis on Oliver's relationship to compositional features, such as framing choices, that echoes Peacock's account of McShane's performance in fictional drama. It is unsurprising, therefore, that Bennett should relate his assertions directly to Klevan's work and conclude that 'Performance of technique here is in synthesis with the technologies of production' (Ibid. 133). Like Klevan, Bennett declares an investment in the 'achievement of expressive rapport', drawing attention to the ways in which the ways in which performance becomes entwined with various compositional features in ways that are effective, engaging and accomplished.

### Emotion and Authenticity

Not all performance on television is afforded equivalently positive evaluation, however. Annette Hill, for example, alludes to the ways in which genre can interact with and impact upon an audience's expectations and judgements of performance and, equally, the extent to

which performance can greatly influence perceptions of programmes within specific genres.

She explains that:

Viewers of reality programming are most likely to talk about the truth of what they are seeing in relation to the way real people act in front of television cameras. The more ordinary people are perceived to perform for the cameras, the less real the programme appears to be to viewers. Thus, performance becomes a framing device for judging reality TV's claims to the real. (Hill 2005: 449)

Reflecting on this account, we can appreciate that performance has the potential to work against some of the aims of reality television, whereby an individual who is perceived to be self-consciously 'acting' can undermine the sense that a real event is being captured at all. However, these distinctions are susceptible to further levels of complexity as notions of authenticity can vary from viewer to viewer, given that they are always based upon a personal interpretation of screen data. Utilising audience research findings, Hill draws attention to this fact when discussing an infamous scene from the first series of the UK *Big Brother* (2000-10; 2011-18) in which contestant Nick Bateman was confronted by fellow housemates over his efforts to duplicitously influence their eviction votes, and was moved to tears. As Hill explains:

Viewers drew on their knowledge of Nick's personality during the series and marked the moment when they thought he was 'really' himself – when he cried. This moment of authenticity is not something that can be generally agreed upon. Young boys thought no adult would cry on camera unless they were genuinely upset, while some

more cynical adults believed that crying to camera was a clear sign of performance.

(Hill 2002: 335)

Here, we can speculate that the belief in whether or not Bateman is genuinely upset or merely pretending for the cameras might affect not only an audience member's evaluation of his behaviour within the moment but also of *Big Brother* and reality television in general: if contestants are understood to be acting even when they appear most emotionally vulnerable, then familiar judgements about the staged (and, essentially, false) nature of the programme and the genre may inevitably follow. It is clear, then, that the nature of Bateman's contribution to *Big Brother* possesses an impact comparable to McShane's in *Deadwood*. He helps to shape the tone and texture of the programme to significant degree but, unlike McShane, the extent to which he is seen to be *creating* a compelling dramatic moment (by, for example, acting out emotional distress) risks negative appraisal due to his status as an apparently 'authentic' contestant in *Big Brother*. In this way, performance has the potential to become a deleterious factor within an audience's appreciation of the television programme.

It is apt that Nick's crying in *Big Brother* should open up questions of authenticity and performance. As Amy Holdsworth and Karen Lury explain: 'tears resist coherent interpretation but, as they leak from the body, appearing as material evidence of or witness to an internal emotional state, they demand a reaction. Tears are provocative: not only do they leave open frames of performance to question but they *invite* speculation' (Holdsworth and Lury 2019: 135-36). The inherent ambiguity of tears therefore requires audiences to form judgements about whether a person's behaviour is genuine or contrived that can never be decisively proven or disproven: we can never be totally certain whether someone's crying is involuntary or affected. In this way, tears can become a key component within the interpretative processes we each enact whenever we watch people on television: speculating



about interior thoughts and feelings by reading outward human behaviour. As a consequence, judgements are made about the emotional sincerity of a wide array of people appearing on television in various contexts, based upon notions of authentic behaviour that are particular to each individual viewer. John Ellis, for example, draws attention to the televised press conference and interview appearances married couple Kate and Gerry McCann gave following the abduction of their daughter, Madeleine, at a Portuguese holiday resort in 2007. Kate McCann was criticised for exhibiting qualities such as a ‘flat sadness’ or a fleeting ‘wounded narcissism’, while Gerry McCann was criticised for using language ‘more appropriate to a corporate executive than a desperate father’ (Ellis 2009: 104). Reflecting on these negative assessments, Ellis notes that:

The McCanns deliberately made use of television to spread the message about their child’s abduction (which remains an unsolved mystery). But many commentators deemed their television performances to be inadequately sincere. As a result, speculation has wreathed around them, encouraged by elements in the Portuguese police, that they were somehow responsible for their daughter’s disappearance and that they might even have murdered her. (Ibid.)

Ellis’ account lays out the impossible standards of appropriate performance that were apparently applied to the McCanns even as they grieved for the bewildering loss of their daughter. Just as an overt display of emotion, such as Nick’s crying in *Big Brother*, could be interpreted as a staged act, so a restrained emotional display – observed by many in the McCanns’ onscreen performances – had the potential to be read by some as unnaturally detached. In each case, there are perceived grounds for claims of insincerity, based upon individual viewers’ perceptions of how someone might authentically react to a given

situation. Self-evidently, the implications for the McCanns were far more serious than for a contestant on a reality television show and led to unfounded and unhelpful speculation amid a police investigation. Furthermore, the situation that the family encountered was surely so extraordinary and shocking that very few public commentators could assess with any degree of accuracy what their reaction should be to it. Nevertheless, as Ellis describes, the opinion was formed in some quarters that the McCanns were providing the wrong sort of performance for their circumstances: not enough emotion rather than too much.

The fallibility of these kinds of judgements is highlighted in the case of Mick and Mairead Philpott. The couple were convicted in 2013 of the manslaughter of their six children the year before. The Philpotts had planned, with a friend, to stage a fire at their home in an attempt to frame a former partner of Mick's. The plan went horrifically wrong and six of the Philpott's children died in the ensuing blaze. In the immediate aftermath of the tragedy, the Philpotts portrayed themselves as victims. They requested and appeared at a televised press conference during which they were each visibly distraught as they thanked the members of the public and the professionals that had attempted to save their children. The press conference was reported as a genuine display of grief by newspapers (Carter 2012; Bentley 2012) but police officers who observed the Philpotts' behaviour off-camera became immediately doubtful of their sincerity, leading them to begin covertly recording the couple's private conversations. Sitting beside the Philpotts in the press conference, for example, assistant chief constable Steve Cotterill was able to observe an anomaly that apparently wasn't immediately obvious on camera: although Mick Philpott dabbed his eyes repeatedly with a crumpled tissue, no tears were present (Champion 2013). This constitutes a very obvious reversal of the kinds of ambiguity Hill, Holdsworth and Lury observe in the presence of tears: the wiping away of imaginary tears possesses self-evident associations with playacting and inauthenticity.

At the couple's trial, Mrs Justice Thirwall delivered a condemnation of Mick Philpott's behaviour: 'Ever since the fire your life has been a performance for the public and police, and then in this court [...] I very much regret that everything about you suggests that your grief has very often been simulated for the public gaze' (Dodd 2013). This emphasis on performance is appropriate, as Philpott's emotional conduct at the press conference can easily be seen to respond to and satisfy those expectations of appropriate grief that the McCanns were judged so harshly against when they appeared on television five years earlier. Somewhat presciently, on the day after the press conference, Michael White sounded a note of disquiet in his account of Philpott's unusual eloquence and self-awareness:

Several features of this are worth noting. One is that Philpott is strikingly good at it, even in what is evidently real distress. He uses all the words expected of him in the contemporary TV culture of empathy and the public-sector world of social workers and benefit offices that he probably knows. (White 2012)

As well as referencing Philpott's experience of public sector institutions, White identifies his conduct as a performance *for* television, one that fits well with the 'sentimental and voyeuristic' media coverage that he perceived the tragedy was receiving, and which had possibly been honed through Philpott's appearances on *The Jeremy Kyle Show* (2005-19) and *Anne Widdecombe versus the Benefits Culture* (2007) years earlier (Ibid). Unquestionably, Philpott's abhorrent actions merit the widespread condemnation they later received but it is also the case that, as he improvised a way of reframing his role in his horrific stunt gone wrong, he misjudged the myriad contexts in which he was performing, and the ways in which his performance would be evaluated differently and at different stages by both on and off-screen audiences. Essentially, we can suggest that Philpott over-estimated the singular

authority that his television image as a grieving father might command – that its initial emotive impact, as reported straightforwardly by the press immediately afterwards, would lodge as the only way to read his predicament – and his own abilities to manage the performance demands he had placed upon himself. The lack of tears in the press conference immediately became an area of suspicion for the police, for example, signalling a disconnect between interior emotion and external display, especially when officers witnessed his ‘jovial behaviour’ prior to the media event and the ‘childlike performance’ of a feigned collapse afterwards (Evans 2013). If Philpott exhibited an acute awareness of how influential media portrayals can be in shaping public opinion, he displayed an equal and opposing lack of awareness about the holistic complexity of police investigations. We might reasonably conclude that he failed to register the extent to which his performance would be scrutinised not simply by television audiences and journalists on the basis of one press conference but by professionals, with years of training and experience in observing potential suspects in cases, who would be piecing together a larger account of his overall behaviour. Finally, in what we can presume to be a frantic effort to construct a plausible persona of victimhood, Philpott failed to appreciate the indelible mark that television performance can leave, meaning that his press conference behaviour could be returned to and scrutinised dispassionately forever. And, indeed, days after the Philpotts’ conviction, the BBC News website ran a feature in which two body language specialists analysed a series of incriminating features in Mick Philpott’s demeanour under key headings: lack of tears, static forehead, eye signals and open palm gesture (BBC 2013).

### Making the Dead

Philpott's ultimately unsuccessful attempts to cover up his crimes through television performance, although extreme, can provide a context for considering other instances in which individuals seek to present fiction as fact through performance, the extent to which they achieve their aims, and how we might evaluate that achievement. For many years, people have appeared on television and pretended to communicate with the dead. These acts originate from the nineteenth-century growth in Modern Spiritualism in the United Kingdom and the United States, epitomised in theatre shows that often employed elaborate stage equipment in an attempt to convince audiences that they were in fact witnessing paranormal phenomena (Lamont 2007: 24). In the television era, self-professed 'mediums' and 'psychics' tend not to rely on mechanical stage illusion, but they all possess significant stage experience gained from their live theatre shows and they each employ traditional methods of cold reading, warm reading and hot reading.<sup>1</sup> Television 'mediums' utilise these different reading

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<sup>1</sup> Cold reading involves the analysis of a person's appearance, behaviour and reactions to make claims about them that can then be attributed to extra-sensory perception or messages received from the dead. This could be very basic such as a 'medium' specifically telling someone in their seventies that they sense the individual has a mother or father that has passed over (which is highly likely to be true). If this is affirmed, the cold reader simply proceeds by interpreting the person's appearance and responses. Warm readings rely on information that could apply to large groups of people. So, for example, rather than analysing the appearance of an individual septuagenarian audience member and guessing that they will have had a mother or father that has died, a 'medium' might announce to a large group that they are in touch with a deceased mother or mother *figure*, which can then open up a much larger range of possibilities – grandmothers, aunts, sisters, mothers-in-law, friends – that have a very strong chance of resonating with a high percentage of people in the group but can

techniques according to the on-screen audiences they are working with and the format of the show or segment in which they feature. If they are interacting with a studio audience, for example, ‘mediums’ might use a combination of cold and warm reading predominantly because vague, generalised statements have a higher chance of connecting with a larger group, there are many opportunities for analysing behaviour and responses, and it is far less likely that the ‘medium’ will know their identities in advance, making it difficult to conduct any prior research for hot reading. However, hot reading could be facilitated if audiences for those shows have been selected, have given details about themselves to production staff that can be passed to the ‘medium’, or the ‘medium’ has spoken to them in advance, off-air. The processes of cold and warm reading are relatively easy to recognise but hot reading is inherently more difficult to identify as, for obvious reasons, the main part of the work is undertaken off-screen. Prominent television ‘mediums’ can vary the kinds of readings they perform and the techniques they employ across a range of show formats in which they appear. In the United States, for example, Theresa Caputo combines starring in her long-running television show *Long Island Medium* (2011-present), which consists mainly of pre-arranged one-on-one or small group readings with members of the public and celebrities, with appearances on daytime talk and magazine shows such as *Anderson Live* (2011-13),

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nevertheless feel precise. Finally, hot reading is a technique that involves gathering information on individuals prior to meeting them and then pretending that these details are being received as a result of psychic phenomenon. So, for example, if a ‘medium’ knew in advance the name of someone who was going to be in their audience, they might choose to look at the person’s social media accounts, and perhaps those of their friends and family, as a means of researching facts about them in advance so that they could deliver very accurate information about them within a reading.

*Steve Harvey* (2012-17) and *The Kelly Clarkson Show* (2019-present), in which she performs readings with larger studio audiences. Similarly, British-born 'medium' Lisa Williams has appeared in her own US shows, *Lisa Williams: Life Among the Dead* (2007-08) and *Lisa Williams: Voices from the Other Side* (2008) and then as a guest on Australian morning talk show *Studio 10* (2013-present).

I want to stay with one of Williams' appearances on *Studio 10* but, in doing so, I am not intending to suggest that she represents an exceptional or extreme case of television 'mediumship'. Indeed, watching a number of 'mediums' like Williams, Caputo, John Edward and James Van Praagh operate, it is striking how similar their techniques and the content of their readings are, particularly when working with large groups. In these readings, for example, the imaginary dead tend to identify themselves by letters that appear in their name (or even sound like letters that appear in their name), they seem especially interested in individuals who have moved house or are considering moving house, have redecorated or are thinking about it (or should think about it), or either have had a birthday or are due to have a birthday (or have a family member whose birthday it is/was/will be). The dead that contact 'mediums' tend to have had medical problems in the chest or stomach area, had difficulty breathing and/or had cancer, their death was a 'shock', they elect to identify themselves as father or mother figures rather than indicate their specific relationship to a living person, and they usually want to conclude their appearance by telling their living friends and relatives that things are 'OK' or 'alright'. In short, the various 'mediums' follow similar lines of cold and warm reading, throwing out possible connections that could apply to almost everyone

and refining those readings based on the responses they gain from audience members and the behaviour they are able to observe and analyse.<sup>2</sup>

This brings us to a central interest in how Williams, like other ‘mediums’, plays not only to the audience she is reading but also to the television apparatus that supports and frames her work. Accounts of television ‘mediumship’ that seek to analyse or expose reading techniques have tended to focus primarily on spoken word, offering transcripts of what the ‘medium’ says as a means of illustrating the common duplicitous strategies and structures that they employ (Underdown 2003: 44; Hyman 2007: 219-22; Trezise 2008: 108-9). We can build upon this effective approach by incorporating a consideration of the ways in which ‘mediums’ utilise performance techniques such as movement, gesture, pace and tone as key components in their act, designed to involve an audience in the game of pretending that the dead are speaking to them, and perhaps to ensure that their cold and warm reading methods are obscured *by* competent performance (in a way that they cannot be in written transcripts). Performance technique can also help to give coherence and energy to a reading that might otherwise fail to convince as a communion between the ‘medium’ and the dead, consequently foundering as an engaging television moment.

Williams’ audience reading on *Studio 10* on 2 March 2016 does not begin flawlessly (Studio 10 2016a). It is worth noting that the video to which I will be referring is an unedited

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<sup>2</sup> It is possible that hot reading could also be involved, if a studio audience has submitted details to the production team in advance, which could then be passed to the ‘medium’, or if the ‘medium’ has had contact with members of the audience before filming, for example. That would certainly respond to the twin pressures of a ‘medium’ needing to guarantee some kind of on-air success rate and a producer wanting to ensure that a reading doesn’t fall flat and become a poor television event.



version, posted on the show's YouTube channel alongside an edited version, with the latter reflecting more accurately what was actually broadcast in the segment (Studio 10 2016b). The presence of the two videos illustrates not only the basic fact that a significant degree of 'live' content on daytime television can be pre-recorded and edited but also the extent to which television performers exert limited control over the way in which their work will be packaged and disseminated. At an immediate level, they are unlikely to exercise influence over representational choices such as framing and editing but, more broadly, their work may exist not only in the broadcast moment but may also enjoy an extended digital life – even in an unedited form – that has the potential to become the definitive version (*Studio 10* broadcasts are not available in international territories, for example, whereas the YouTube channel is more readily accessible). In this context, Williams has to work to maintain the relative success of each reading not only to ensure that the pretence of her act is sustained for the studio audience but also because any element of her act has the potential for inclusion in the broadcast edit.

Williams begins confidently, stating that she 'has' to come to two women in the second row 'the one in the pink and the one in the jacket, the dark jacket', using a straight-arm gesture to indicate clearly the individuals upon which she wants to focus and then bringing her hand back to her torso to mime a 'dark jacket' as she speaks the words. This gesturing, first to the two women and then back to herself, might be understood as Williams' initial sleight attempt to create rapport between herself and the audience members, which will be crucial to the success of her reading. She continues this pattern as she again extends her arm to point towards a space between the women, stating that: 'Between the two of you there's a lady that's standing with you and I'm not sure if you're related but I've got a mother figure, so [gesturing to the woman in a pink cardigan] has your mum passed pleased?'

**(Figure 1)** Williams relaxes her hand gesture on 'mother' and softens her enunciation of the

word to create a slightly warmer tone. Again, we might regard this as a subtle but skilful way of creating an emotional rapport with audience members, encouraging their sympathetic engagement with a reading through the evocation of familial sentimentality shared with the 'medium'. We cut to the woman in pink as she silently shakes her head and we can see why Williams might have made the assumption about her mother: the woman looks to be in her sixties and there is a decent chance one of her parents would be deceased. We might also recognise the significant advantage Williams affords herself in placing the spectre of the dead mother figure *between* two women, so that the reading could apply to either of them. The directness of the straight arm gesture successfully masks the inherent vagueness of her assertion and the extent to which Williams has increased her odds of success by associating her claims with more than one person. Indeed, when the woman in pink responds with a negative, she simply switches her focus to the woman sitting next to her, asking 'would your mother have passed over?' and capitalising on the reserve option she has created for herself. This strategy also falters, however, as the second woman shakes her head, leading Williams to follow up with 'she's still with us?' It is not clear whether the woman was shaking her head to indicate her mother was not dead, or whether she simply did not want to be part of the reading, as she becomes flustered at Williams' follow-up question, exclaiming 'Oh, I don't know', looking to other audience members, and touching the lapel of her blouse self-consciously. In any case, Williams is clearly unlucky here as this woman appears a similar age to the first, if not older, and so the tactic of pretending that a dead mother figure was standing between these two would surely have a decent chance of success.

Williams deals with this setback by modifying her performance to retain the flow and drive of her reading. She begins a circling motion with her outstretched arm, now referring to a much wider area of the audience, saying: 'It's in this area. There's a lady standing here. And I keep being shown there's a feeling of cancer, alright, so somebody passed with

cancer’. At the mention of cancer, she begins rotating her hands in the air, like the motion of wheels or cogs turning, as though she were physically working to generate an association in her audience, making it their responsibility as much as hers. **(Figure 2)** The introduction of ‘cancer’ is useful as it appears to give the reading specificity but actually provides greater scope as the suggestion is aimed at a now larger group of people and cancer is a leading cause of death in Australia. Furthermore, Williams is careful to describe a ‘feeling’ of cancer and that ‘somebody’ passed with the disease, so keeping the parameters wide enough in the event that no one in the audience claims a mother figure who has specifically died of cancer. She asks a section of the audience ‘can you understand this?’ but is met with silence so shifts her focus beyond them, asking ‘Or am I back there?’ and concluding with ‘It’s just in *this* area’ as she extends her fingers in a soft claw shape to indicate a fairly wide expanse of space. **(Figure 3)** Again, she is met with silence and shaking heads, which she acknowledges – ‘No?’ – and so she shifts her focus again, asking ‘Can you relate to this at the back?’, pointing in that direction with two fingers stretched out, which has the advantage of not signalling one individual directly, so widening the possibilities for recognition. She continues with the back row: ‘There’s a lady that passed with cancer...’ and, again, her tone remains soft and encouraging, as though she were gently willing them to recognise the connection she is pretending to have made with the deceased. This is a key facet of Williams’ act as she manages to maintain an enthusiastic and friendly demeanour even when receiving negative responses, working *with* the audience rather than becoming terse or even confrontational as other ‘mediums’ like Theresa Caputo and John Edward occasionally do. This approach relates to two aspects of Williams’ performance style. Firstly, she often endeavours to make herself appear ordinary and relatable (sometimes starting readings with statements like ‘Don’t worry, it’s just normal, I speak to dead people’), which bears some similarities to Caputo’s projection of an everyday, non-mystical reader, but Williams’ version is much more pared-

down, lacking trademark features like Caputo's high bouffant hairstyle, tailored outfits or talon-like painted nails, for example, which have the potential to create distance from an audience. Indeed, in her earlier television appearances, Williams has short, spikey dyed hair, which by 2016 she has changed to a blander, softer shoulder-length cut with more subtle red highlights. Secondly, Williams frames her readings as a kind of therapeutic experience for audience members, drawing attention away from the inherent weirdness of pretending to channel dead spirits and instead concentrating on how these connections can foster spiritual well-being. This is consistent with a more general attempt to align 'mediumship' with popular or pseudo-therapy, illustrated by the Lisa Williams School website which offers courses in 'Healing', 'Growth' and 'Guidance' (Lisa Williams School n.d.) and by her absurd suggestion that 'psychics' should be regulated like nurses and therapists (Studio 10 2017). It is important, then, that her manner should remain open and encouraging throughout readings, reinforcing the notion that she is non-threatening, ordinary and, crucially, capable of providing help.

With the mention of 'cancer' producing no immediate reactions, Williams changes her line of questioning to single out one woman on the back row, who has nodded slightly, asking 'Has your mum crossed?' and, at the same time, smoothly adjusting the direction of her outstretched arm away from her original point of focus and towards this new individual. Williams maintains this pose as she asks: 'Do you actually have her jewellery? Is there a connection with a ring and a necklace?' Allowing the outstretched arm stance to linger lends a degree of precision to Williams' questioning, as though she were honing her initial readings to find their true recipient in the audience. Her continuing calm, level tone of voice helps to manage the potentially jarring transition in topics, as though the process of refinement was a natural progression. These performance attributes usefully gloss over the fact that the attempted reading has already moved across a series of people and now a new detail – the

mention of inherited jewellery – has been added in (and kept strategically imprecise: the mention of both a ring *and* a necklace has the potential to be generally correct, even if only one of the items is affirmed, for example). The woman on the back-row gives a slow, small nod in response to Williams' questions, which is enough to instigate a very rapid succession of claims and questions from the 'medium' using a technique known as 'shotgunning', whereby a great quantity of information is thrown out and the individual's responses then shape the course of the reading:

Thank you. And there's a connection – I'm going to tell you there's a connection to cancer. Would your father have also have crossed over as well please? Thank you. Because I'm being shown – she was standing right there and I was like 'I've gotta – it's in that area'. Alright, let me go with this. You're named after somebody? Or there's a connection to the name either after your grandmother or there's a following of the name. Would you understand this? [Woman: Yes, I do.] Thank you very much. Now, would you understand the name John? [Yes.] Thank you. Would that be connected to your father as well? [No.] OK. Who's the name 'John'? [Ah, in-law?] OK, and this person's passed over as well? [No.] Alright, he's still with us. They want to talk about John. I'm not sure whether John's not well or there's a feeling of illness around John? Because I'm being shown there might – they want to talk about John. It's, like, just to watch out, just to be careful. I've also got a problem with the chest area. Someone couldn't breathe towards the end. Would this be mum please? Alright, because she's giving me this laboured breathing, very difficult. Thank you. She's also making me aware that you were right by the side of her. She needs to thank you for being right by the

side of her as well, alright? And she's saying she couldn't have done a lot without you because you really helped her and you were the person that took care of her, would you understand that? Alright, she needs to thank you for all of this, she's also giving me a 'happy birthday' so there is a birthday that's coming up so would you understand that please? [Yeah.] OK, and she wants to give a massive 'happy birthday'. She's also talking about your hair, have you recently just had it cut or done? [No.] Right, she loves how your hair's been done, alright, she really likes – she says it hasn't changed but you look amazing, alright? Now she's also acknowledging a sister. Now I would believe she had a sister in spirit as well, is that correct? [No.] Or sister-in-law? Because there's some form of sister in spirit with her. [Erm...she was very close to my father's sisters.] Right, OK, because she's bringing me in with the fact that the sister's in spirit with her as well. OK, show me what else. She's also giving me difficulties with her legs as well, so she couldn't walk and there were problems with the legs. Your father's a quiet man but I do want to say he's quite a jovial man when you got to know him. I do feel like he could be a bit of a practical joker if he wanted to be, does that make sense to you? [Well, I didn't see that side, but probably.] Right, he's got a practical joking way, I don't know if that's the side but he's quiet as well. Thank – no – sorry, can I just change that? It was your *mum* that was a practical joker. [Ooh, no.] Who? Am I switching spirits? Who's the practical joker? Hold on one second. Let me put him on hold, we've got a gate crasher. It happens. Gate crasher can sit there and let me finish off your reading. Your father's quiet, alright, he's very quiet. 'Hi from dad', alright, is all I'm going to say. Mum wants to tell you that she loves you, alright, happy birthday, she's giving me this feeling

that she wants to thank you for everything that you've done for her and you're keeping her memory alive. Are you wearing her ring by any chance? [Er, not today, no.] Right, but do you normally wear it? [From time to time.] Alright, cos she's saying wear the ring. So I'm going to love and leave you with that. [Audience applause.]

This reading is composed of elements that can be found in the work of many 'mediums': the mention of 'John' (traditionally a very common name in English-speaking countries); language kept deliberately ambiguous, such as suggesting a *connection* to 'John' and 'cancer' (rather than directly naming or diagnosing a relative); asking if the woman 'understands' the information being given (rather than inviting an evaluation of a claim as true or false); a deceased relative who 'couldn't breathe towards the end' (an unsurprisingly common near-death condition) or had problems with their legs (which has multiple meanings); an unspecified name that runs in a family (they often do); the mention of a birthday 'coming up' for someone (which is highly likely to be true); and a piece of inherited jewellery (common to almost anyone who has lost a relative). So many potential avenues are opened up, and at such a relentless pace, that it becomes increasingly difficult to accept that Williams' has any coherent sense of a dead relative at all. At the same time, many of the attempted connections are unsuccessful: 'John' turns out to be a false lead, the woman has not had her hair done, there is no sister who has passed over, and neither parent was a practical joker, not even paradoxically 'quiet' ones. However, Williams demonstrates her accomplished improvisational skills as she very quickly negotiates paths out of these blind alleys: the spirits have actually come to deliver a warning about the unfortunate John's hidden health problems, the dead mother wants to praise a hairstyle that hasn't changed, the sister is actually a sister-in-law and, most extraordinarily, the practical joker is revealed to be a 'gate-crasher' spirit.

Throughout, Williams doesn't outwardly register the false hits or that she is working to correct them: she holds a smile as she speaks, maintains eye contact with the woman, keeps her body language open as she spreads her arms and leans into the audience, adding definition to words through gesticulation and mime (acting out the feeling of not being able to breath properly, for example). These techniques help to sustain a connection with the audience member and construct a sense that they are working through this reading together, rather than becoming a game of the 'medium' being put under pressure to demonstrate their skill. This is especially useful because, self-evidently, the reading is so heavily dependent upon the audience member's responses, which Williams is interpreting and building upon with mixed success. Moreover, Williams seeks to solidify the notion that she is receiving messages from the dead, rather than inventing them based on the information and signals provided to her by the woman in the audience: she frequently says 'thank you', occasionally gesturing upwards or to the side with her hand as she does so, and at one point says: 'OK, show me what else'. Words and movement combine to create the tangible presence of a dead person speaking to Williams, which in turn displaces responsibility for any false assertions or lack of clarity because blame can always be apportioned back onto the 'spirit' in the room (as with the gate-crashing practical joker). Those seconds in which Williams pretends to listen to the ghostly voices also advantageously provide time to invent new directions, without making that process apparent to an audience, so that thinking is effectively portrayed as hearing and the 'medium' is positioned as a conduit for meaning rather than its creator.

### Ethereal Ethics

In the first few minutes of her *Studio 10* appearance, Lisa Williams gives a somewhat unconvincing display of her psychic abilities. Nevertheless, she successfully negotiates those



shortcomings in order to deliver an effective television performance, which builds to an emotional conclusion as thanks and love are offered from beyond the grave and an (albeit tenuous) sentimental attachment to a piece of jewellery is suggested. She demonstrates an awareness of the need for each televised reading to build poignantly in this way within the segment, a trajectory that is complemented here by the camera's ever-tighter framing of the woman in the audience (from medium-long shot to medium to close-up between cutaways), which is evidently designed to capture a culminating emotional response. Williams uses her deft physical and vocal skills to move the performance towards this point. Her ability to manage a difficult opening in these ways provides an illustration of her performance achievement: that she is able to employ a range of different strategies to support the central fiction that she is communicating with the dead. However, any achievement is compromised precisely because it facilitates an activity that relies upon deceiving an audience and can only succeed if that deception is obscured through performance technique (and not referred to directly as a trick, in the way that equivalent illusionist acts often are). Television 'mediums' like Williams exhibit an intricate understanding of human emotion, as they are able to react to even slight behavioural signals to deftly modify their readings. However, this skilful empathy sits at odds with a professional need to manipulate audiences into believing that their dead relatives are speaking through them. There is an inherent recklessness to this: even in these somewhat benign opening readings, there is a chance that relatives may be left with a feeling that they didn't know their loved ones as well as they thought or even that 'John' might watch the broadcast, believe the reading, and become anxious about the mystery illness which doctors are unable to diagnose, which might erupt at any moment, and which was only invented for the convenience of resolving Williams' initial false guess. These risks increase as the segment progresses and Williams becomes more confident in her performance: she later offers a member of the studio crew the repeated claim that his friend's suicide was not

intentional, which may be intended as a comfort to that individual, but which very obviously contains potentially troubling implications. More disconcerting still, in other television readings, Williams pretends to grieving parents that she is speaking to their dead children (*Voices From the Other Side* Season 1, Episodes 1 & 2) just as Theresa Caputo will pretend to a sobbing eleven-year-old girl that she is receiving messages from her dead father (*Long Island Medium* Season 9, Episode 12).<sup>3</sup>

It is tempting to speculate about the ethical decisions Williams and similar television ‘mediums’ make when they embark on these fictional readings. It is possible that they are ‘shut-eye’ practitioners that genuinely believe in their psychic abilities (Hyman 219) which, in the context of our discussion, we might interpret as an extension of the broader social phenomenon, identified by Erving Goffman, of ‘the performer taken in by his [sic] own act’ as opposed to ‘cynical performers’ who are not (Goffman 1956: 10-11). Goffman is keen to stress that cynical performers may not necessarily be only self-interested and, indeed, it is conceivable that a ‘medium’ may consider inventing the ghosts of dead relatives an

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<sup>3</sup> Other ‘mediums’ behave yet more recklessly. Sylvia Browne, for example, famously appeared on television and provided grieving parents with information about their missing children that turned out to be false. In 1999, the grandmother of six-year-old Opal Jo Jennings was told she had been abducted into slavery in Japan: she had in fact been kidnapped and murdered by a child molester within hours of disappearing. Similarly, in 2002 Holly Krewson’s mother was told that her missing daughter was on drugs and working as a dancer in a Los Angeles ‘adult’ nightclub. The family duly made repeated visits to Los Angeles, searching the clubs for their daughter, and it was only after her mother had passed away that Holly’s remains were identified: she had been murdered in 1996. (Shaffer and Jadwischczok 2010: 40).

acceptable falsehood if it provides comfort to individuals. Obvious contentions to this attitude exist: Lisa Williams, for example, is not providing grief counselling to individuals (and is not qualified to do so) and her television appearances effectively function as advertising for her lucrative live shows, private readings, courses and merchandise, which suggest entrepreneurial opportunism rather than altruistic concern. Whatever moral view we take, it is nevertheless important to understand and evaluate television appearances like Williams' *as* performances, designed to create and maintain the fiction of paranormal phenomena. In this way, they merit the kind of close attention that has more usually been afforded to professional actors in fictional roles: it is pertinent to emphasise that 'mediums' have also prepared an act and that they are not candidly appearing on camera without rehearsal and planning. Williams controls and shapes the spectacle of the television event through her careful performance choices, demonstrating an awareness of the dramatic and representational structures at work within broadcast media. However, our admiration for her abilities will be qualified by any reservations we have regarding the ethics of her act. This central tension has potentially useful repercussions for the ways in which we appreciate television performance more broadly. It is understandable that, given the need to emphasise the importance of performance on television following a period of relative neglect, the major scholarly accounts have tended to adopt a positive or even celebratory tone when analysing particular case studies. However, the example of television 'mediums' suggests that not all television performances can be evaluated similarly and, given that an accomplished performer may use their skills to deceptively or exploitatively present fiction as fact, we may find cause to regard their achievement as dubious. This brings us, ultimately, to a more complex position whereby we are able to both admire a television performance and, at the same time, query its underlying moral ambitions. We might profitably expand this notion to consider other examples of television performance that can be both impressive and

duplicitous: the shopping channel host who employs a range of relentless skills to promote products of questionable quality, for example, or the politician who successfully evades an interviewer's questions because they have been taught 'bridging' technique as part of their media training.<sup>4</sup> Taking this approach involves analysing not only the form that a performance takes but also those aspects that it is designed to obfuscate or conceal. As a result, 'achievement' in television performances can never be straightforward a term: they have a potential to elicit both admiration and disquiet.

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<sup>4</sup> 'Bridging' is a technique, widely employed by politicians, that gets an interviewee from the question asked to the answer they want to give (often a key message).

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