

Paranormal TV
by
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"Wow! Did you hear that??" No, because the synthesizer, Japanese gong, and cow bell were playing too loudly on the sound track. "Hey! Did you see that??" No, because the camera was focused on the faces of the investigators and not on the hallway where they were investigating.

TV shows are in business to make money by selling product. The producers are not much interested in advancing knowledge of the unknown, except as a means to produce revenue. They are very interested in knowing as much as they can about human foibles and frailties so they can be exploited to entice mindless consumers to purchase products. The shows are not pitched to advertisers as an exploration of the boundaries of human existence and a search for answers to life's most important questions. Rather, they are pitched as appealing to the high school educated, male adult in the 18-25 demographic, who is likely to use YOUR product. What you may think of as criminal fraud, we call that marketing.

How many shows have the TAPS folks on *Ghost Hunters* done on the Stanley Hotel? I remember two. When we stayed at the Stanley in September, they informed us that the show has been there 14 times; each time, the hotel was rented for four to five days. How many hours of footage did the producers sift through to get two show segments? It is easy to figure out how many hours of evidence comes from, say, four cameras, four recorders, and two or three TV cameras for an eight hour investigation. What do we get in a fifteen minute segment? One investigator is spooked by the presence of spiders; another sees a shadow; one screams when surprised by a display mannequin; one reports being touched on the arm; etc., etc. Maybe we also get an EVP or two.

IMHO, Paranormal State is an infomercial for the Catholic Church, and substitutes the most ridiculous, baseless, and improbably theories for actual evidence. I must admit though that the fellow they use as a medium is very entertaining, though I would not use him in an investigation. Most of the other shows are flagrantly false, and not worthy of any sort of critical attention. Hint: When the camera is focused primarily on the faces of the actors, that is a sure sign that the producers are going for drama and not for truth. When the cameras are placed in harnesses such that they are permanently fixed on the wearer's face, turn the show off unless you like drama, or the actor is cute--you will not get any legitimate discovery from that show. Another hint: when a conversation is taking place between two individuals, say, in front of the house, and when the camera angle changes ever two seconds (which is what youth TV found produces a sort of minimum stimulation when nothing of substance is happening), that means the scene has been carefully staged, perhaps even scripted, with multiple cameras, and that the filming of a ten minute conversation may have taken all day. The whole TV industry has unfortunately adopted the worst characteristics of commercial spiritualism.

It is easy to criticize something that is so blatantly crass and commercial. However, not everyone is worthy of this criticism. I have a high regard for Jason and Grant of *The Ghost Hunters*. They have done for paranormal investigation what Benny Goodman did for jazz, and the Canadian Brass did for Renaissance and Baroque music--they brought it into mainstream consciousness and made it legitimate. I can imagine that they have had their go-arounds with the producers, but they seem to be interested in legitimate discovery. Unfortunately for the producers, many investigations come up empty, so drama must be added for commercial value.

The TAPS crew offers not only legitimate investigation technique and analytical methods, but offers some truly amazing pieces of footage and recorded sounds and voices. If appropriate theoretical foundations were added, it might even be too legit for TV. Notice that the investigative methods they use have evolved from early shows. They no longer appear to make

much use of thermometers, dowsing rods, single photographs, mediums, or demonologists. Perhaps they do, but these things are not apparent in the show. Clearly, they are gravitating toward what works, and experimenting with new methods and technologies. It is fortunate that they do not know that there is no way that the questions of life after death will ever be settled to everyone's satisfaction. No matter how impossible it is to be successful, and no matter how frustrating the task is, we trudge on because hope springs eternal. It's like golf.

The TAPS investigators have drawn many conclusions about paranormal evidence, both for and against, with which I disagree. Agreement, fortunately, is not the goal. Since none of us knows anything about the paranormal for sure, other than there are things that defy conventional explanation, we only seek to broaden each other's consciousness.

The primary limitation for TAPS is its popularity. Some of the places they investigate are massive and complex structures. Generally, there is foreknowledge of their investigation, giving locals with intimate knowledge of the physical layout of the place an opportunity to sneak in and inflict chicanery. Credit can go to Jason and Grant for being appropriately skeptical, and for chasing down noises, shadows, and thermal images to see if there was an explainable source. More credit can be given for actually debunking (an old term used in social science) some of them. I am guessing, though, that even the most sincere effort is not going to catch the truly crafty.

A secondary limitation is the producers' desire to create something entertaining so they can sell product. According to the theory of constraints, the more they strive for sensationalism, the less opportunity there is for valid discovery--not to say that valid discovery is absent from the show. This they do by editing the video to contain only the stuff that sells, and by putting in those awful sound effects. In psychology, the predisposition to interpret evidence (in this case to edit the video) in favor of a desired result or a foregone conclusion is called experimenter bias, or The Rosenthal Effect. A rule of thumb: the more the cameras focus on the faces of the investigators, the more focused the producers are on selling product.

One advantage to an investigation conducted by a lesser known group is its greater probability of discretion. On the other hand, businesses that have been investigated by TAPS have shown remarkable increases in revenue. With the lesser, you are lucky to get your name on an obscure website like this one.