

**Institution: Birkbeck, University of London**

**Unit of Assessment: 29 English Language and Literature**

**Title of case study:** Superstition, the Gothic imagination and cultural form: impacts on cultural life and public discourse

### 1. Summary of the impact

As an internationally recognized expert in Gothic and science fiction, Roger Luckhurst has made a significant impact on the interpretation of and creative inspiration provided by these genres. His work has increased interest in popular Gothic fiction, the focus of this case study, by connecting it with knowledge and belief in the modern period, and treating it as a bellwether of significant cultural change. His introductions to new 'World Classic' editions of several nineteenth century works have contributed significantly to their worldwide success. He has helped develop public discourse on the history of marginal beliefs and has inspired a number of artists engaging with these ideas.

### 2. Underpinning research

In the ten years since the publication of *The Invention of Telepathy* (Ref 1), Luckhurst has consolidated a reputation for working on the space between fact and fiction, science and magic. His research investigates marginal cultural forms from the late nineteenth century to the present day, focusing on different kinds of fringe beliefs, including spiritualism and the Victorian invention of telepathy which turned spiritualism into the 'science' of psychical research. Recent work has examined the Edwardian fear of mummy curses in his monograph, *The Mummy's Curse* (Refs 3 & 4). Luckhurst has also investigated recent superstitions around alien abduction, the supernatural powers sometimes claimed as an after-effect of traumatic events, and contemporary horror film, in collaboration with the British Film Institute.

Luckhurst explores how the forms and iconographies of both Gothic and science fiction texts can bleed beyond the boundaries of genre fiction, becoming a privileged means by which traumatic experiences can be given narrative shapes (Ref 2). This work uses literature, art, film and television as its cultural focus for investigating what is a wide cultural phenomenon. Rather than contest or dismiss the persistence of superstitious or pseudo-scientific thinking, he investigates the adaptive forms of magical thinking that the language and imagery of the supernatural allows. Luckhurst uses deep cultural historical research to investigate the origins of terms like 'telepathy', and their emergence from overlapping contexts of energy physics, dynamic psychology, field anthropology, literature and myth. He examines their origins and tracks the remarkable dissemination of terms once dismissed as merely pseudo-scientific.

The Gothic, the scientific and the pseudo-scientific are intimately intertwined. Gothic fiction often relies on vanishing points or gaps in contemporary sciences to generate supernatural possibilities. Hence, telepathy relies on brand new paradigm-shifting energy physics and new dynamic psychologies, and theories of how mummies might act supernaturally rely on ideas of distant influences through ether, radiation, hypnotic influence, and so on.

Luckhurst's academic contribution has been internationally recognised. He has been an invited speaker at over twenty conferences since 2003, in Ireland, Scotland, America, Austria, Germany, Belgium, Poland and Spain, including a keynote at the International Gothic Association. He has also been a visiting fellow at Birmingham University, and at the Flemish Academy of Arts and Science in Brussels for work in this area.

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Luckhurst has sought to extend academic and public engagement with this work through a number of collaborative initiatives. These include:

- An international conference in 2005 at the Centre for the Humanities at Columbia University in New York ('What is Enchantment?'). He then organised a follow-up conference with many of the same participants, 'Magical Thinking', to continue the transatlantic conversation in London (May 2007).
- 'The Night Shift', a series of seven public events on London at night (2010-11), attracted up to 70 people each evening, offering a platform to disseminate work on the theme of London at night then being done in different departments of Birkbeck. It included literary studies, museum and curating, history of art, and history, and was inaugurated by the prominent London writer and journalist, Sukhdev Sandhu discussing his book *Night Haunts*.

**3. References to the research**

1. Luckhurst R. *The Invention of Telepathy 1870-1901* (Oxford UP, 2002)
2. Luckhurst R. *The Trauma Question* (Routledge, 2008)
3. Luckhurst R. *The Mummy's Curse: The True History of a Dark Fantasy* (Oxford UP, 2012)
4. Luckhurst, R. [The Mummy's Curse](#) in Times Higher Education:

Research grants

- January to June 2011: AHRC Fellowship (£47 000) to complete *The Mummy's Curse*

**4. Details of the impact**

Luckhurst's work has had a significant impact in relation to cultural life, with a consequential economic impact in publishing, and the inspiration his work has provided for creative artists, and in public discourse.

**Publishing**

As a result of his academic monograph, *The Invention of Telepathy*, Luckhurst was invited to become an editor of popular editions of Gothic novels in the Oxford World's Classics series:

- *Late Victorian Gothic Tales* (2005) (Sales: print: 10,889; e-book: 424)
- Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Jekyll and Hyde* (2006) (Sales: print: 64,363; e-book: 612)
- *Dracula* (2011) (Sales: print: 13,227; e-book: 227)
- H. P. Lovecraft's *Classic Horror Tales* (May 2013) (Sales: print: 3868; e-book:15)

His publisher writes, 'In a crowded marketplace it is essential for readers to be able to differentiate between editions in order to find the book that best serves their needs. Roger Luckhurst's editions provide something distinctive by virtue of the excellence of their introductions, notes, and other editorial additions. ... Luckhurst further enhances his editions by the inclusion of other texts that shed light on the main work. In the case of *Late Victorian Gothic Tales* he selected the stories to represent this genre, and opened up its literature for study in a single, inexpensive volume. These unique features, together with the quality of his contributions, ensure that the editions are widely read and used by those studying the books, and the editions in turn enhance the reputation of the Oxford World's Classics series' (Testimonial 1). While scholarly, his introductions are tailored for general, non-academic audiences and have received reviews in the national and international press. Luckhurst blogs for the OUP website and produces video web introductions for the editions (Source 6). The *Tales* and the Lovecraft edition were explicitly designed to extend the conception of the Gothic 'canon', and involved challenging the Oxford editor to publish what had been long considered pulp fiction in a 'classics' series. These editions helped shift the Oxford editor's

perspective on how to value popular literature. Several of these texts have been adopted as the key editions on undergraduate courses in the UK and US.

Recognising his expertise in the field, in 2012 BFI Publishing offered Luckhurst two commissions relating to the BFI Gothic season: an essay for the BFI *Gothic Compendium* and a book on *The Shining* (in the celebrated 'BFI Classics' series), published in 2013. He was also commissioned to write short story on the mummy's curse for the collection *The Book of the Dead* sponsored by the Egyptian Exploration Society and the publishing company 'Jurassic London', expanding the diversity of his interventions.

### **Creative artists**

British artists have used Luckhurst's work on the Gothic and science fiction as a source of inspiration for their work and to help audiences interpret it. The British artist and film-maker Patrick Keiller has long referenced Luckhurst as a source of ideas and asked to be interviewed by him during his exhibition 'The City of the Future' at the BFI (Feb 2008). The artist Linda Toigo produced an artist-book version of *Jekyll and Hyde* informed by Luckhurst's edition, which gained her special commendation in her final show at the London College of Communication and was selected for exhibition at the Zabłudowicz Collection in 2011. She writes 'Roger's introduction to the Oxford University Press edition of the novel, and in particular his analysis of the Psychology of the Double in Stevenson's time has been the starting point of all my theoretic and visual research and from his key points I based most of my choices in terms of structure and design' (Testimonial 2). The painter Dolly Thompsett, who uses science fictional and Gothic imagery in her paintings, asked him to write a catalogue essay for her show at the Ritter/Zamet gallery in Autumn 2009. Most recently, in June 2013, Luckhurst was invited to chair an onstage Q&A with the director of Creation theatre company following their production of *Jekyll and Hyde*. Luckhurst's edition was a key reference point for the production (Source 7).

### **Public discourse**

Luckhurst's research on popular culture from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and his ability to make these ideas accessible to contemporary audiences, makes him a trusted consultant on these topics in the media, where he has been widely reviewed (Source 8). His publications have led to radio appearances, including a 15-minute interview with Laurie Taylor and Marina Warner for *Thinking Allowed* (audiences of 984,000) on mummy curses (August 2011); a 15-minute talk on the centenary of Bram Stoker's death for Radio 3's *The Essay* series (April 2012: Source 9); a 28-minute documentary on Radio 4 about mummy curses ('True Tales from the Crypt', Sept 2012: Source 10). A BBC arts producer: 'I regularly commission Professor Luckhurst because of his unique research, his excellent communication skills and his ability of discuss often esoteric subject matter in an intelligent and inclusive manner' (Testimonial 3). In November 2012, Luckhurst was commissioned by BBC Worldwide to advise on the global appeal of certain Gothic and science fiction narratives, with a view to aiding drama commissioning decisions in the future. He advised Optomen Television on their 'Mysteries of the Manor' series for American television, regarding Highclere Castle and the Carnarvon curse (2013). He acted as expert advisor to Raw Television company, helping to shape the script on an episode on mummy curses for their 'Unexplained Mysteries' series by providing historical data and contacts.

His impact on public discourse has led to numerous engagements with a wide variety of non-academic organisations and audiences, the Bishopsgate Institute (2012), Bart's Pathology Museum, the Wellcome Institute (2012), and the Lichfield Literary Festival (2012). With UCL's Flinders Petrie Museum, Luckhurst developed a series of public talks and workshops around the museum collection and the creative imagination, in May and Oct 2012. The curator commented that, 'Using Roger's book [*The Mummy's Curse*] helps to break down barriers and look at the objects and learn new things based on their Victorian reception. The informal approach brings new

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responses to objects within the collection and allows for a non-academic audience to engage.’ (Testimonial 4)

In 2012, he was asked by the Head of Education at BFI Southbank to advise on the programming and educational support for their Gothic season (launched in June 2013) and has been commissioned to speak on horror film to BFI audiences (Aug & Oct 2013) and co-organised both a Gothic study day and a day of screenings at Birkbeck with BFI curators for November 2013: ‘Professor Luckhurst is bringing together a study group of academics and writers to reflect on the remarkable recent transformations of genres loosely grouped under the term “the fantastic”. The group aims to explore the striking convergence of genres like dark fantasy, science fiction, horror and the Gothic, in film, TV, and fiction.’ (Testimonial 5).

**5. Sources to corroborate the impact****Testimonials:**

1. Editor, Oxford World’s Classics (factual statement)
2. Linda Toigo, artist (factual statement). She also references Luckhurst in her [‘Major Project Report’](#):
3. BBC arts producer (factual statement)
4. Curator, Flinders Petrie Museum (factual statement)
5. Head of Education, BFI Southbank (factual statement)

**Additional sources**

6. Roger Luckhurst [introduces Dracula](#) uploaded by Oxford University Press, with 409 views (July 2013)
7. Collaboration between Oxford University Press and [Creation Theatre](#), Oxford in their production of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde
8. Media reviews of Luckhurst’s include reviews of The Mummy’s Curse in [The Dispatch](#) (Columbus, Ohio); [The Scotsman](#); the [Rationalist Association’s website](#); and [Los Angeles Review of Books](#).
9. [Radio 3 essay](#) on Bram Stoker’s *Jewel of Seven Stars*:
10. Radio 4 documentary [‘True Tales from the Crypt’](#):