

Those "Ghosthunters"

Written by James Randi
Wednesday, 26 November 2008 00:00

Reader Tristan Noel asks:

I was curious, of course – as I'm sure you get a lot of this – about the skeptic's view of the show Ghosthunters. Are they, like Criss Angel, one of us, knowingly using camera tricks and such? Are they just misinterpreting real life random data (emf tone frequency waves, etc.)? Or are they simply sensationalists on TV who push the "Normal Guy" image (Roto-Rooter plumbers) to gain compatriotism with the average viewer, and use equipment tricks to make people think they see ghosts?

Well, we've referred often to the show on SWIFT, and you could have done a search to find references, but my opinion is that these naifs just aren't capable of using the over-tuned and over-sensitive equipment they so cherish. Anything becomes significant, and they can't differentiate between normal radio transmissions, cell phone signals, nearby remote control pulses, and the hundreds of EM signals they can detect. They go in armed with thermometers and get apoplectic if a chilly breeze occurs – usually in a drafty, deserted, dwelling. A sound not immediately identified will elicit sighs of wonder from them, and almost any sensory input takes on eerie qualities, by default. If they were to examine non-"haunted" locations, they'd get the same plethora of input but they reject that as non-applicable.

Tristan continues:

My wife is a huge fan of the show, and it is the only source of our truly frustrating "arguments," when she tries to convince me that they've found true evidence of the paranormal. Often, I can explain it quickly with logic. A recent occurrence involved a "shirt tug," caught on camera. Of course, she was floored. Me, I watched the scene very carefully about four times. The pull point was very narrow, less than a centimeter across, maybe even less – a puffy jacket. Also, the actor feigned being pulled backwards, but the tug was straight down. Wire trick, perhaps? Shifting a weight in his jacket?

I dunno. I wasn't there, nor were you...

It's not the first time the show has been a bit off. One supposed "psychic" reading had a floating

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heat signature going from the read-ee to the psychic. A trained eye can tell that all it is, is the heat equipment recalibrating its range automatically.

Your expertise on "heat equipment" parameters far exceeds mine.

Mayhaps, James, if you're bored, or looking for a pot to stir, this would be a good straight shot? I know Penn and Teller already touched on it briefly, but not very directly. Mayhaps if you aim straight for this one, we could have another Uri Geller closed off? Perhaps it would put an end to the endless new ghosthunter groups "from home." I have two roommates who are in one such group, and tend to take it far beyond the levels of a responsible hobby.

Well, Tristan, I'm never bored. I don't have the time for that luxury. However, these "ghostbusters" avoid being tested, or even defining what they do, perhaps because that might lead to the discovery that they don't have anything to sell, while there are eager buyers pounding on their doors...