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Comment

The truth is not out there ... it's in here

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Observer

Craig and Jane Hamilton-Parker would like TV producers to know that they're looking for their own show. Britain's pioneers of psychic television (their **Spirit of Diana Seance** was seen by 30 million viewers worldwide, according to their website) have seen their children leave home and are now 'free to travel for long periods'. A hint that this couple will travel to the ends of the earth to get their own programme.

You don't need a crystal ball to see that the Hamilton-Parkers will be snapped up by some profit-sniffing independent production company. An Ipsos/Mori poll last week showed that a third of Britons believe that some governments are concealing evidence of extraterrestrial beings, a third of men and 44 per cent of women believe in ghosts, and a third of women and a quarter of men read horoscopes. Clearly, the Hamilton-Parkers are tapping into a subculture of superstition that cannot be contained by the paranormal phenomena on **Lost**.

'Innocent escapism' is how most believers in paranormal phenomena defend their practice. The one Tarot card session by which I was tempted was hosted by a housewife in Primrose Hill. There was nothing sinister about her guests; it was just sensation-seeking, and the women were as thrilled at the prospect of submitting themselves to a real clairvoyant as they would have been at the news of a politician caught in a sex scandal.

Thrill-seeking can prove dangerous, though, when the horoscope, ghosts and evil omens rule life and relationships. The thrill-seekers turn into passive zombies when all initiative passes to the stars.

But perhaps what those mums in Primrose Hill and the Hamilton-Parkers are looking for is not just escapism, or a controlling invisible force that will take responsibility for their lives. Perhaps what motivates them is a sneaking suspicion that the reasoning process is not enough. If reason always ruled, our priorities, choice of partner and work might be not only different but dissatisfying.

Many of those who hold superstitions dear also claim to be religious. The search for 'other' is the same, but the paranormal is the soft option. Its disciples do not demand that you give half your earnings away or love your neighbour as yourself. Go the paranormal route and a few bob for a Tarot

reading will do.

'The heart has its reasons which reason does not know,' the 17th-century mathematician Blaise Pascal explained. He would be horrified to learn that his insight has unleashed a frenzy of mediums and spiritualists; but he would also point to their rationalist attackers and warn: 'You ignore your limitations at your peril.'

Maybe the Hamilton-Parkers could beam him up on their forthcoming show.

Keep it brief, Beeb

I arrived late at last Tuesday's British Museum annual directors' dinner, and had to walk past an array of guests that included Professor Robert Winston, Liz Forgan, Dan Snow and David Starkey. I had not been able to get away from the celebration of the Today programme's 50th birthday any earlier, I explained, as it would have meant leaving in the middle of Helen Boaden's speech.

The director of BBC News had rightly waxed lyrical about the flagship programme, but she did hold the floor a tad longer than some of her audience might have wished.

'That won't happen here,' one of my fellow diners assured me. Neil MacGregor, the director of the British Museum, had a golden rule of oratory: never talk for more than five minutes, as an audience's attention span never lasts longer. An excellent tip, I said, where did he pick it up? While filming a documentary for, er, the BBC.

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