

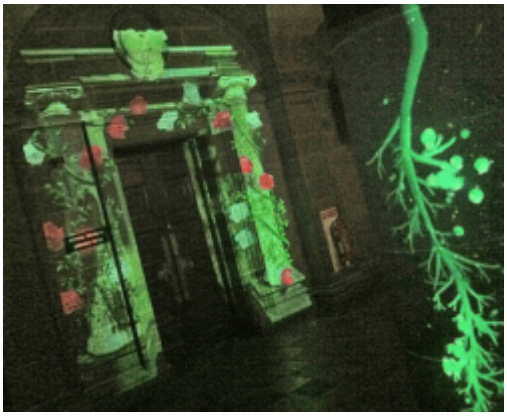
Haunted by media

Description

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This is Dying Matters Awareness Week in the UK. We are a â??death denyingâ?• society inept at dealing with bereavement, planning for the end of life, and making arrangements for after we are gone.

On the other hand, thanks to television, films, video games and the Internet, we confront our mortality every waking moment of our media-saturated lives.



Any campaign to encourage better preparation for death has to operate against a background of *thanatological* (deathly) themes from the mass media: health reports, news (not least the impending trial of Ratko Mladic), morbidly explicit Scandanavian crime dramas, and war documentaries, through to tv fantasies of vampires and werewolves, violent action films, and endemically cruel cartoons â?? not to mention shooter and car crash video games.

Mortality, immortality and tragedy are narrative and literary themes amplified by the intensity of visual and sonic electronic media. The mediatization of death has salutary effects. According to theorist of popular culture Keith Durkin, â??By rendering death into humor and entertainment, we effectively neutralize it; it becomes innocuous, and thus less threatening, through its conversion and ephemerality in the mediaâ?• (p.47).

In *Specters of Marx* Jacques Derrida links the media to haunting, describing the way the news and other media unsettle the boundaries between the public and the private. The media (or to be precise the *medium* in which the media operate) is â??neither living nor dead, present nor absent,â?• and its study is a kind of *hauntology* (p.63).

There are online services you can subscribe to that release pre-planned emails to a recipient list announcing you as dead if you donâ??t log in at some predetermined frequency (Dead Manâ??s Switch). See Digital death planning for dummies. People have complained about automated requests from Facebook to befriend users who are no longer alive, as if ghosts from the past. See 2010 article in the *New York Times*.

This weekâ??s valuation of Facebook stock at $104 bn reminds me of the incessant flow of economic health indicators charting the fortunes of companies and nations, warning of oblivion in some cases.

Electronic media influence the way people deal with death, not only in terms of content, but in the media technology itself â?? particularly the electronic transmission and storage of the human **voice**.

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Voice and spirit

The Old Testament of the Bible begins â??â?¦ and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.â?• In my Revised Standard Version â??Spiritâ?• is footnoted â??or *wind*.â?• Then we read â??God said, â??Let there be light.'â?• It takes just a few intertextual hops to link wind, breath, spirit and voice. A person taking their last breath is â??giving up the ghost.â?•

The presence of the voice was arguably the earliest indication that a part of us (spirit) could be separated from the body, and outlive the physical body. After all, people can call out and make their presence known while unseen behind a screen. We generate and pick up echoes, and some entertainers can â??throwâ?• their voices, as in ventriloquism.

In Rabelaisâ?? sixteenth century satirical novel *Pantagruel* a ship enters the waters where a fierce battle was once fought. Various noises, including shouts and cries had become â??frozen in the air.â?• But with the return of warmer weather these noises began to melt. The sailors then heard what the voices from the past were saying (p. 568).

Even before sound recording technologies, imaginative writers were thinking of the persistence and preservation of voices.

Sound theorist Douglas Kahn portrays the earliest electronic technologies as dealing with the separation of the voice from the body. Thomas Eddison, as the founder of the phonograph, thought that his device â??could keep the voices of the dead alive,â?• to invoke the â??inaudible ranks of the deceasedâ?• (p.214).

Commentators at the time of Eddison spoke of â??hearing the futureâ?• (p.219). The claim that communications technologies can transcend the constraints of the human body draws on such separation between an essential, spiritual, self (**aura**) and its visible body. *Aura*, from which derives *aural,* is of course *breath* or *breeze* (OED).

In film, sounds are easily characterised as coming from outside the frame, off-screen or off-stage. The UK channel Living TV used to produce a popular ghost-hunting programme called *Most Haunted.* Much of each programme was recorded using a night-vision camera, and the usual indication from the team of paranormal activity as they moved through the darkness was the exclamation, â??did you hear that!â?• Presenters and camera crew would turn enthusiastically in the direction of the sound. Rarely was there anything to see. Haunting is aural before it is spectral.

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The sÃ©ance is similarly characterised by noises off, that then assume the character of sounds from beyond, and sounds from the deceased. Random sounds are easier to produce than visual effects. According to sound theorist Michel Chion, sounds are ambiguous and incomplete until their source is identified.

The presentation of death in the mass media generally draws for its narratives, myths, denials and euphemisms on the visual and ocular: spectres, visions, apparitions, shadows, and transitions between light and dark. The sense of sight provides the evidence we crave, but the key to the thanatological resides within the depths of sound.

Aura(l) evidence



For whom the bell tolls â?? This slow-moving, untitled mechanical sculpture by Anish Kapoor is here positioned beneath the permanent memorial to the war dead in the sculpture court at Edinburgh College of Art. The black rectangular slab is actually a rotating template cut to the bell profile. It shaves the blood-red wax surface of the bell, maintaining its shape as the wax deforms under gravity. Think of the obelisk (though thicker) in Arthur C. Clark and Stanley Kubrickâ??s *2001 A Space Odyssey*. Listen to GyÃ¶rgy Ligetiâ??s choral requiem (YouTube).

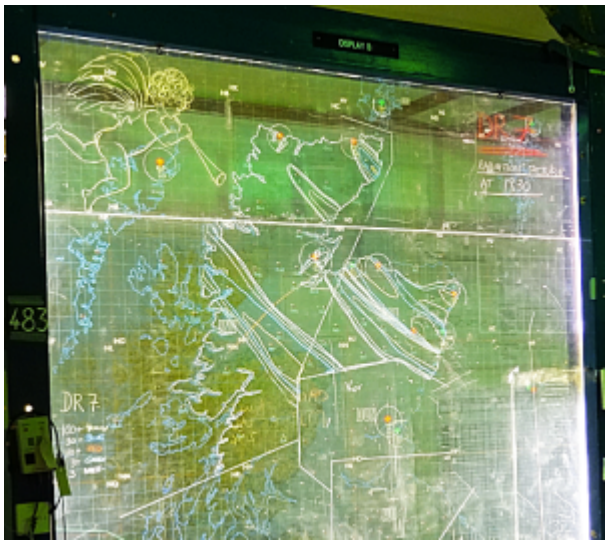


Ruin â??pornâ?• â?? Abandoned house, Bad Schandau, Southern Germany. Think of the role of rustling, crackling and reverberation in *The Blair Witch Project* and other aural presentations of haunting.



Light tunnel â?? The ramped tunnel leading into the cold war bunker in Fife, Scotland, now open as a tourist attraction. At the end of the tunnel is the iron door excluding contamination. Booms, drones and sirens â?? see Luigi Russolo and Jacques Attali on noise and war. On bunkers see article in *Domus* by former student Roberto Costa: â??Wikileaks and the architecture of data-loss paranoiaâ?• (subscription to Domus required), or his blog.

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When the wind blows â?? This chilling map shows the progress of fallout after a strike (in simulation) on key UK targets, the contours of death determined by the prevailing winds. *The War Game* (1965) is a BBC mock-documentary about a nuclear strike on Britain. *When the Wind Blows* (1986) is an animated film on a similar theme.

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Notes

- The first image in this post is part of an installation (*Lifehouse*) that animates building surfaces and models in the Edinburgh University Anatomy Museum. Designed and implemented by Atika Bennamane, Ami Bogin, Lucille Yaju Hsieh, Szu-Hsuan Lee, Olivia Phyte, Steven Reynolds, Ana Roman, and Greg Telakis, tutored by Panos Mavros, Nikitas Gkavogiannis and Zafeira Kampouri (Documentary video).
- The second picture shows a tour of the Royal Mile in Edinburgh. The tour guide projects animations of former residents (street sellers, fishwives) onto surfaces via a hand-held data projector. Tourists listen to commentary and street sounds on mobile audio players. Prototype designed and implemented by Stella Doukianou, Danai Korre, Marios Kokolakis, Zhen Liu and Yumo Chen, tutored by Rocio von Jungenfeld.
- For further discussion of sound, space and mobile media see Coyne, Richard. 2010. *The Tuning of Place: Sociable Spaces and Pervasive Digital Media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- For more on sound see blog posts Where is that sound?, Making a noise, Silent night, The kingâ??s speech impediment, and The sublime indifference of waves.
- All photographs are by the author.

Category

1. Culture

Tags

1. death
2. haunting
3. media
4. sound
5. spirit

6. voice

Date Created
May 19, 2012
Author
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