

One knock for yes two for no

Description

You might think that advanced technologies obliterate the need for a belief in spirit, a world outside of everyday tangible experience. More accurately, techno-science, and its attendant promotion of rationalism and the cultures of modernity have supposedly [disenchanted](#) the world. Techno-science explains the world without the need to look for extra-physical cause and effect.

There's a contrary view though. Technologies have a habit of amplifying the idea and possibility of the supernatural. Technologies of communication and transportation in particular explain, simulate or suggest what the supernatural is or would be like, especially as people's imaginations extend beyond the limits of current devices, technologies and infrastructures.

Making spirit

In this and other respects technologies provide a pool of metaphors from which to draw in explaining, developing and even creating the supernatural.

Rapid transportation suggests instantaneous appearance and disappearance - levitation, dematerialization, transcendence. (I probably thought of this as last Sunday was - The Transfiguration, the Sunday before Lent.) Cables and switches, not to mention magnetism and the wireless, point to action at a distance - a staple of magic.



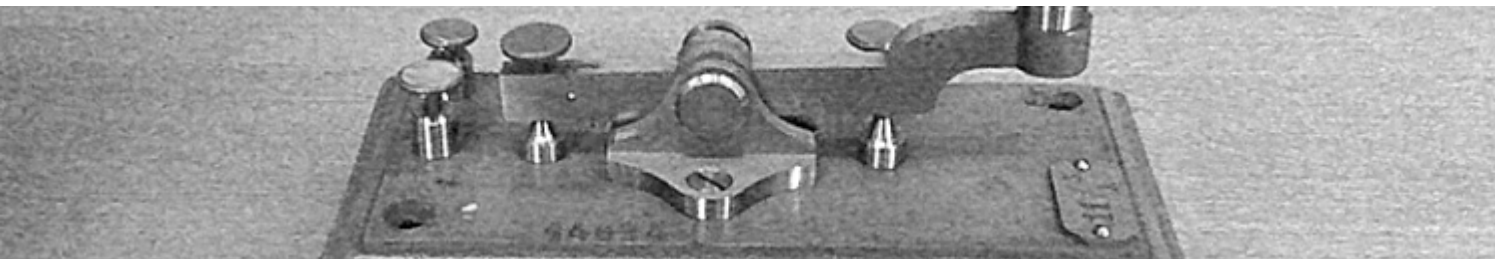
Sound recording provides a means of memorialising ‘the last words of a dying person’ (12) according to the inventor of the gramophone Thomas Edison (reported by Kittler), which in turn inspires thoughts of communicating with the dead (according to sound theorist Douglas Kahn).

Out of body experience

Most importantly, technologies of sound extract and preserve something from the human body that is already evident as a separable ‘essence,’ namely our voice and our breath.

The latter is already suggestive of spirit and soul, and technologies of communication amplify this sense of the ‘soul’s apartness’ a philosophy of disembodiment embraced long ago by Plotinus (203-270 AD).

‘The soul’s separate place’ is simply its not being in matter, not being united with it, not moulded in matter as in a matrix. This is the soul’s apartness’ (55).



Rapping

In this vein, I like the suggestion by German media theorist Friedrich Kittler of the coincidence between the invention of Morse code and attempts to hear and receive messages from the spirit world.

‘the invention of the Morse alphabet in 1837 was promptly followed by the tapping specters of spiritistic seances sending their messages from the realm of the dead’ (12).

An article by Anthony Enns provides a helpful account of this peculiarly Victorian practice.

The main similarity between the spiritualist practice of rapping and the development of electrical telegraphy was that they both involved the translation of messages into codes (4).

Hence, the famous seances conducted by the young American sisters Margaret and Kate Fox. They toured the UK in 1852, and impressed Arthur Conan Doyle, who explained (via a narrator) the apparent rapping response of a spirit at one of their seances:

I then asked: 'Is this a human being that answers my questions so correctly?' There was no rap. I asked: 'Is it a spirit? If it is, make two raps.' Two sounds were given as soon as the request was made. I then said: 'If it was an injured spirit, make two raps,' which were instantly made, causing the house to tremble. I asked: 'Were you injured in this house?' The answer was given as before. 'Is the person living that injured you?' Answered by raps in the same manner. I ascertained by the same method that it was a man, aged thirty-one years, that he had been murdered in this house, and his remains were buried in the cellar; that his family consisted of a wife and five children, two sons and three daughters, all living at the time of his death, but that his wife had since died (62-63).

So there's something of a murder mystery here. I bought Conan Doyle's book for 99 pence on Amazon Kindle, but I've lifted this quote from Enns's article. Enns then reiterates: 'The practice of rapping thus involved the use of a binary code that closely resembled the dots and dashes used in telegraphy' (4).

It's the coded aspect of these apparent communications that interests me. Spirit has several connotations. There's the 'spirit of the times' ([Zeitgeist](#)), and the 'spirit of place' (*genius loci*). The 'spirit of the city' is also the city of spirits, i.e. the city of mysteries, if not the city of codes.

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