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Visit.

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to the Ethics of
Recording

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2/2013

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Ghosts have haunted people from time immemorial, but in the nineteenth century they expanded their territory, becoming electrical. After the advent of modern techniques of reproduction they began haunting the photographic image and audio transmission.¹ Welcomed as a godsend, a harbinger of hope for life after death, such spirit images include the silhouette of a dead person at the edge of a photograph or, in the case of a recording, a whispering voice from the otherworld registered on a phonograph. Artefacts of this kind were not merely a source of entertainment adding colour to life at salons. Spectral photography had a powerful subversive potential: it pointed to a way of accessing the invisible that provided an alter-

1 See J. Sconce, *Haunted Media. Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television*, Durham 2000; N. Mirzoeff, "Ghostwriting. Working Out Visual Culture", *Journal of Visual Culture* 2/2002, p. 242.

native to the scientific method and revealed truths that transcended human senses.² It undermined the predominant scientific worldview even more due to the fact that it shared the same methods of documentation. It is an interesting paradox that technologies that were rationally invented were also used to discover the irrational.

The mummification of voice

If the relationship of photography to the spectre seems obvious, it is only because of their shared visual nature,³ the relationship of the sound with the world of spectres is more intricate. Sound is regarded as a manifestation of life, while movement is considered an attribute of human vitality. What happens, however, to life when its sounds are reproduced – does it die or go on living? If the voice comes from a dead machine, why does it affect and embrace the listener as though it were alive?

The moment when the body vanishes and reveals itself only as a vibration is downright uncanny. Jonathan Sterne documents various deathly connotations of sound reproduction in his book.⁴ For instance, the first users of recording devices regarded a voice detached from the body as belonging to a returning spectre or to the dead. It is common knowledge that spiritualism, involving voices from the other world, and séances played an instrumental role in

2 L. Kaplan, "Where the Paranoid Meets the Paranormal. Speculations on Spirit Photography", *Art Journal* 3/2003, p. 19.

3 See R. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, New York 1981.

4 J. Sterne, *The Audible Past. Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction*, Durham, London 2005, pp. 287–333.

the invention of the telephone⁵ and the popularity of the radio in the 1920s. Since the advent of sound recordings, the figure has functioned of the “voice of the dead”, which one can hear “even after death”. Death is ubiquitous in all early discussions about recordings,⁶ and it is no different in the case of the radio and telephone. “The telephone has always been haunted by the rhetoric of the departed,”⁷ says Avital Ronell; Simon Reynold similarly claims: “recording has always had a spectral undercurrent.”⁸ The invention of the telephone provoked endless speculations about the possibility of communication with the departed by means of this device. At the close of the nineteenth century, it was even believed that within a short time it would be possible to hear the speech of the dead with the aid of a radio or telephone. Such associations have undoubtedly survived until now. Dead calls in the dead of night, hearing an unfamiliar voice in the receiver or, even worse, a silence, are signs that something sinister is about to happen.⁹

For the first listeners, death explained and shaped the cultural impact of the recording. The meanings of recordings evolved under the influence of the Victorian culture of death in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Another interesting context pointed out by Sterne is the embalm-

5 Thomas A. Watson, who had a share in Bell's invention of the telephone, took an active part in séances. See A. Ronnel, *The Telephone Book. Technology, Schizophrenia, Electric Speech*, Lincoln 1989, pp. 245–250.

6 See also F. Kittler, “Gramophone, Film, Typewriter”, trans. D. von Mücke, P.L. Similon, *October* 41/1987, p. 111.

7 A. Ronnel, *The Telephone Book...*, op. cit., p. 438.

8 S. Reynolds, *Retromania. Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past*, London 2011, p. 312.

9 Cinematic voices of unknown provenance are the subject of Michel Chion's study entitled *The Voice in Cinema*, trans. C. Gorbman, New York 1999.

ing of corpses, a well-developed chemical process at that time. The hope placed in the phonograph that it would rescue sounds which would otherwise perish (it was common for instance to record speeches with good advice for future generations, so-called “talking epitaphs”) derived from a transferring of the approach to corpses onto the recording of the human voice. Such an approach to the reproduction of sound makes it possible to think of the recording as of a way of preparing a voice for future “exposition” – for playback. The registration procures sound occurrences – a manipulation corresponding to beautifying a corpse’s skin – and presents it to society in the most accessible and easily communicable form. To be able to listen to sounds, they need to be first technologically “embalmed”. In the early twentieth century, this deadly process will take on an economic aspect – devices and recording which produce a clearer sound will sell better.

The touch of a voice from the otherworld

The concept of hauntology employed by Simon Reynolds (and borrowed from Jacques Derrida) derives from this array of thanatoid meanings of recording and sound transmission. Reynolds used it primarily to name certain musical trends based on sampling (mainly from the British scene) and forms of music evoking nostalgia underpinned by eeriness.¹⁰ The artists he describes as “hauntologists” invoke the idea of a lost utopia: in their practice they analyse the operations of memory, focusing on obscure, fantasmagorical aspects of recording. From Derrida’s

10 S. Reynolds, *Retromania...*, op. cit., pp. 311–361

thoughts Reynolds retained the motif of unfulfilled variants – the musical past contains missed “opportunities” which a hauntologist can retrieve in two ways: either by rewriting history or by endeavouring to resurrect it in an unchanged form.¹¹ The interpretation of Derridian theory he put forward undoubtedly dominated the hauntological approach to sound. It seems, however, that it fails to do justice to all the potential consequences that could be derived from the spectrology delineated in *Spectres of Marx*. Derrida also emphasised that telecommunication technologies did not supersede ghosts but, conversely, reinforced their presence. It is easy to note that the same logic which is behind the appearance of a ghost – something belonging exclusively to the past but *nevertheless* returns – is also applicable to film and sound recording. Hamlet’s phrase which Derrida analyses – *Time is out of joint* – is certainly a perfect definition of the temporariness of recording. Time in recording is “out of joint”, it is dislocated, “sprained”, a breach through which the audio past can be heard. Derrida points out that a person being recorded tacitly assumes that it will be possible to hear them after they have died.¹² We are haunted not only by the past but also by the future – spectrality overwhelms us first because the horizon of death is contained in the recording itself, the awareness that the only part of the body that will remain is a peculiar representation of it in the form of a voice. On the other hand, as Derrida rightly notes, “even if we were to die while recording [...] this will

11 Ibidem, p. 39.

12 J. Derrida, B. Stiegler, *Echographies of Television. Filmed Interviews*, trans. J. Bajorek, Cambridge 2002, p. 39, 117.

be and will remain “live”, a simulacrum of life”.¹³ A paradox resides in the fact that although death lurks behind every corner, everything sounds as if the world were in perfect order. Such is the two-tier nature peculiar to every hauntological artefact: the “surface” is ordinary, belonging to its epoch, and in some respect naive or innocent; while underneath there lurks, as Žižek would have it, a “perverse reverse” which undermines all the obvious, trite significations.

Derrida’s “spectre” is something entirely distinct from the “spirit”, a fully immaterial being. The spectre unites oppositions: it is a non-sensory presence, intangible and at the same time corporeal and cognizable by means of the senses – it is “neither here nor there”, it oscillates between materiality and nonexistence.¹⁴ The spectre, though not fully material, turns out to be more powerful and overwhelming than a real presence.¹⁵ Inherited and half-forgotten ideas, significations, fragments of the cultural repertory exert a greater impact on reality than the actions of living people. Does it sometimes resemble a recorded sound? Although it is devoid of the body of the person acting, it is audible and can genuinely “move” us.

Haunted acoustic spaces

A more apt metaphor for such immaterial though powerful apparitions and “sound” sentiment comes to mind:

¹³ Ibidem, p. 39.

¹⁴ J. Derrida, *Specters of Marx. The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. P. Kamuf, London 2006, p. 6.

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 13.

one kind of ghost described in the folklore of Western Europe and the United States is the poltergeist. A poltergeist is not so much an incorporeal, visual spectre (who can be potentially conversed with, as in *Hamlet*) as its acoustic counterpart – “poltergeist” in German means a “rapping ghost” (from *poltern* – to knock, to rap and Geist – ghost).

According to Roland Barthes, in looking at a photograph we commune with a shadow of the past, a ghost in a visual form.¹⁶ An entirely different situation takes place when one is haunted by a poltergeist, which is able to make elements of its surroundings tremble; it can move something in a room (or in us), break glass, bite, pinch, and hit. It seems that the touch of an incorporeal poltergeist thus conceived will allow for a better characterisation of the acoustic experience than a comparison to spectrality, which will always be a phenomenon of a visual nature.¹⁷ Accounts of the visitations of poltergeists include descriptions of experiences related to the space of the house, and the materiality of things and sounds. These concern the lifting, moving and throwing of objects, levitation, making a mess; furniture is rearranged, bottles are smashed, stones and lumps of coal are thrown about and/or heated up (so-called lithobolia). Accounts also mention broken windows, fires, touching (occasionally of an erotic nature), duvet pulling, shaking beds, lightbulbs which fall out, unscrewed by invisible hands.¹⁸ Above all, however, a poltergeist is a “rapping” ghost that

16 R. Barthes, op. cit., p. 21.

17 “The specter is first and foremost something visible”. J. Derrida and B. Stiegler, *Echographies of Television: Filmed Interviews...*, op. cit., p. 115.

18 “English Poltergeist”, *Western Folklore* 1/1950, p. 79.

makes noises: knocking, clattering, creaking, tapping the table, thumping, slamming doors, stamping feet, rattling bones, the traditional clanking of chains and eerie noises in the attic – all the noises heard within a house that cannot be explained by human action. Besides these, an entire repertory of “human” sounds can be heard: sobbing, swearing, screams, whispers, coughing.¹⁹ What is interesting is that there are also cases of musical poltergeists.²⁰ In this case, there would be nothing metaphorical in a poltergeist: invisible orchestras are playing, the melody of a non-existent piano is heard, a family woken up at night can hear their dead son playing the violin.²¹

The cited examples of poltergeists' behaviour and sounds to a certain extent constitute elements of excess, “by-products”: either of a voice (in speech the communicated meanings are upstaged by what Barthes describes as the “grain of the voice”²² – e.g. the timbre of a whisper or of the larynx), or of the house, that is, the sounds that are inseparable from the inhabited space. It is impossible to reside in a house without making sounds. To inhabit means to enter into a relation of friction, to establish physical contact with the materiality of the house. It is sufficient to take into consideration the conflicts caused by excessive noises coming from neighbouring private spaces – ways of resolving them are still a sore point in

19 L. C. Jones, “The Ghosts of New York. An Analytical Study”, *The Journal of American Folklore* 226/1944, p. 250.

20 B. Lee, “Psychic Phenomena and the Law”, *Harvard Law Review* 6/1921, p. 625.

21 L. C. Jones, op. cit., p. 250.

22 “The ‘grain’ is the body in the voice as it sings”. R. Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, trans. S. Heath, New York 1977, p. 188.

the legislation of Western countries.²³ David Topp, who describes the phonosphere typical of an average house, says: “In every place that feels or becomes uncanny and unhomely, there is a sound that does not belong, an interloper”²⁴. The visitation of the poltergeist seems a rebellion against the materiality of the house against its inhabitants. In a place which should be, in principle, a haven of tranquillity, an area of absolute property (or, as Benjamin puts it, the “étui of the private individual”²⁵) there appears a traumatic schism infecting the acoustics and inanimate objects. Just as in Freud’s concept of the uncanny – an innocent and well known space suddenly becomes indefinite, unconquerable, fearful. The poltergeist is evidence that it is impossible to inhabit a house “fully”.

Exorcisms and recordings

The category of poltergeist can serve as a model for the experience of the uncanny in a recording along with its material and formal aspects. If the presence of the spectre is undesired and inconvenient – violating, according to Derrida, the division into present and absent, past and present – then what would be similarly problematic in a recording? The fact of the matter is that it also has its own peculiar materiality, seen in random elements interfering with a “smooth” reception: the sound of the carrier itself (e.g. the saturation of

23 See E. A. Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity. Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900-1933*, Cambridge 2002; K. Bijsterveld, *Mechanical Sound. Technology, Culture, and Public Problems of Noise in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge 2008.

24 D. Toop, *Sinister Resonance. The Mediumship of the Listener*, New York 2010, p. 148.

25 W. Benjamin, “Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century”, [in:] W. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, R. Tiedemann (ed.), trans. H. Eiland and K. McLaughlin, Cambridge, Mass. – London 2002, p. 9.

the tape), the hum of the player, or background noises inadvertently recorded. A recording will always be imperfect in some respects (the case of digital artefacts, as well) because the absolute reproduction of sound is unattainable. Imperfection is still the case despite a historically constructed but still prevalent ideal: the category of fidelity created by the producers of the first sound apparatuses with a view to convincing consumers that they were dealing with an experience that was “identical with natural.”²⁶ Hence, indefatigable efforts to attain a maximum proximity between voices and tones, to eliminate static and any lack of clarity, to erase any evidence of the work of the recording device.

A house visited by a poltergeist is a structural analogue to a sound recording which is always characterised by opacity. There emerges an analogy between architecture, ghosts and sound (the space of the house and the spectral space of a recording overlap and blend when a musical player is turned on within the house). Just as the ideal space of a house or workspace is supposed to be a site where sounds are properly managed (for example, the quiet of the home separated from the noises of the external world), the space of recording is subject to the processes of repression, organization, and the “domestication” of obstacles that could potentially interfere with the experience of aural continuity and clarity. The reproduced sound is haunted by interferences, gaps and excesses, which according to the prevailing view have to be eliminated, silenced, or, to employ a word from a different field,

²⁶ J. Sterne, *The Audible Past...*, op. cit., pp. 215–288.

exorcised. Exorcism directed at the poltergeist causing such confusion is analogous to the currently prevailing process of “crystallising” a recording and “purifying” it of all uninvited guests occupying the aural space. In 1927, Adorno said: “As the recordings become more perfect in terms of plasticity and volume, the subtlety of color and the authenticity of vocal sound declines as if the singer were being distanced more and more from the apparatus. (...) The incidental noises, which have disappeared, nevertheless survive in the more shrill tone of the instruments and the singing.”²⁷ Although it was written in a particular period, during a time of rapid development in sound technology, the text is remarkable for its still-relevant motif of exorcism. Static returns like a malicious phantom. The return of noise that bothers Adorno is a sign of dissatisfaction that the quality of the improving sound is still not good enough to offer the authenticity of a real aural situation. Although the noisy ghosts contaminating the space have been ousted, they still return to haunt what is supposed to be clear – the sound and timbre of instruments. Rather than bring acoustic reality closer, the increasing accuracy of the reproduction only makes the presence of the apparatus more obvious, while the illusion of transparent technology and the cult of *fidelity* are exposed.

The ethics of noise

If sound transmissions are so uncanny, why do recordings or the radio not fill us with deadly fear? Barthes wrote

27 T. W. Adorno, “The Curves of the Needle”, trans. T.Y. Levin, *October* 55/1990, pp. 48–55.

that society domesticates and contains its insanity in two ways: by inscribing photography into the framework of aesthetic experience, turning it into art,²⁸ or by reducing it to the commonplace. Poltergeists in recording are kept in check by the cult of fidelity. We domesticate voices, inscribing them into the rules of the everyday, into aesthetics, replacing the missing sources of sounds with images (album covers, the artist's photo). By pointing to the source of the sound, indicating the place of origin, we fill the void arising from the absence of the body. The radio, a medium having a strong socializing propensity and aiming to establish a community of listeners,²⁹ avoids dead silence at all cost (the participants in recordings are repeatedly told that the radio does not like silence), since nothing being communicated would be an indication that the community had fallen apart. Telephony, in turn, has always been described as a medium marked by sexual and sensual excess related to the violation of intimate distance.³⁰ Michel Chion notes that we do not permit just anyone to whisper into our ear.³¹ That is why in a telephone conversation it is necessary to establish first the identity of the interlocutors; otherwise we could fall into the trap of endless conjectures.

28 R. Barthes, *Camera Lucida* ..., op.cit. p. 36. "Society, it seems, mistrusts pure meaning: It wants meaning, but at the same time it wants this meaning to be surrounded by a noise (as is said in cybernetics) which will make it less acute. Hence the photograph whose meaning (I am not saying its effect, but its meaning) is too impressive is quickly deflected; we consume it aesthetically, not politically."

29 M. McLuhan, *Radio. The Tribal Drum*, [in:] M. McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, New York 1964.

30 J. Sterne, *The Audible Past*..., op. cit., p. 171–173.

31 M. Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*..., op. cit., p. 63.

In that case, how should we treat the transmission of sound? What is our responsibility towards the recording based upon? How should we handle poltergeists? In *Spectres of Marx* Derrida provides a critical description of mourning, which in his opinion aims to domesticate spectral gestures and to give the departed a definite shape.³² Such a “burial” deprives them of any influence in shaping the future. As an alternative Derrida suggests “unconditional hospitality”, that is, respecting the returning spectres and accepting their cumbersome nature from the border of the body and spirit. This opposition would manifest itself in various approaches to the practices of listening and the processes of recording and producing of sound. On the one hand, we can talk about reducing the spectrality of the recording, the erasure of traces of the operation of the recording devices: the spectral voices are then to return clear, unequivocal and stripped of all cumbersome ambiguities. Acoustic mourning, intent on the “purification” of the recording, wants to convert, transform and adapt it to the requisites of the present. By suppressing all manifestations of historical (belonging to another time) and ontological distinctness, it precludes their true impact on the present and future cultural phonosphere.

On the other hand, a genuinely gracious listening would allow any ambiguous and unexpected returns. The point is not only to accept the eerie nature of the recordings but also the whole “lock, stock and barrel” with which they

32 J. Derrida, *Specters of Marx...*, op. cit., p. 9.

arrive – their imperfections, opacities, or, for instance, the historical traits inherent to a particular carrier or recording technique. Rather than repress these, it is better to let them speak, allow them to disrupt the statistically comprehended space of the sound and to make them dynamic and rich, and though not always fully legible, full in its meanings. Derrida also mentions in an interview that in the process of recording we should not suppress in ourselves the peculiar way of thinking and talking which is set in motion when we press the record button – it is better to retain the signs of the process of recording.³³

From this point of view, remastering older recordings, so widespread today, or the seemingly neutral compression of tracks used to maximize and to balance sound levels as attempts at appropriating a transformation that was motivated by economic reasons (a universal sound fit for mass consumption) and by the requirements of the present (i.e., the submission of older sounds to technological progress). The problem is not the manipulation of recordings, or their creative reworking and recontextualising, but the fact that a broadly understood ideology of fidelity makes adapting recordings to current standards and purely technical operations on sound transmission become something taken for granted, something objective and not requiring reflection.

Now it becomes clearer what Reynolds meant when he emphasised the spectral nature of the music which he

33 J. Derrida, B. Stiegler, *Echographies of Television...*, p. 70.

analysed. The noises and the historical aspects of the medium preserved in the sampled recordings (Caretaker, Boards of Canada, Ariel Pink or artists from Ghost Box label) prove that our cultural memory is shaped not only by the productive qualities of a particular period, but also by the subtle properties of the apparatuses themselves. There is no denying that in mainstream popular music it has become standard practice to employ such effects to create a particular retro atmosphere. It is an effect of broader changes in today's phonosphere, which reflects, as the slightly pessimistic subtitle of Reynold's study puts it, "pop culture's addiction of to its own past".

In 1983 Derrida appears in an improvised film entitled *Ghost Dance*,³⁴ in which he articulates a certain paradox: "long live the ghosts". It is an entreaty to accept what is otherworldly – to welcome ghosts with all their otherness. The electric spectres can be marked by imperfection, rough execution, vulgar graininess, incomplete mediation – as though the return of the body were cut short halfway. The trembling of such poltergeists literally "touches" the hearing; it is not so much a frozen photographic spectre as spectral energy dissected from moveable energy. The hauntological artefact evokes the past moment simultaneously with a painful memory about the moment, which transforms us.

34 *Ghost Dance*, dir. Ken McMullen, 1983.

Abstract

The article is devoted to the history of apparatuses for sound reproduction and to nineteenth-century speculations about the presence of ghosts in electric appliances. Its aim is to explore the relationship between sound recordings and home space in light of the concept of hauntology described by Jacques Derrida in *Specters de Marx* and reinterpreted by Simon Reynolds. The metaphor of the poltergeist suggested in the article characterises the contemporary aural experience, which grows out of the contemporary concept of fidelity, and is reflected in the production of music and such operations on sound as remastering, the compression of soundtracks and the purification and “crystallisation” of recordings.

Bio

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