

CzasKultury/English

The Alphabet
of Hauntology

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What comprises a spectral, music-related genre such as hauntology? The list presented below is an attempt to pinpoint the most essential ingredients of this nebulous phenomenon, to catalogue its most significant representatives and indicate its affinities with other genres – both in music and in other creative fields.

A for Advisory Circle

“Remember, electricity cannot be seen or heard. Harmful, invisible forces surround us everywhere we go. Fortunately The Advisory Circle is on hand to help us make the right decisions”. The musical project authored by Jon Brooks, whose albums were issued on the Ghost Box label, is directly inspired by Public Information Films, brief television programmes warning young viewers against various hazards: playing with fire, swimming in unsupervised areas, or talking to strangers. Brooks explained in an interview for *The Wire* that the atmosphere of a lurking

threat is familiar to anyone who grew up in the 1970's: "Everything's fine, but there is something not quite *right* about it."

Another noteworthy project by Brooks is a record entitled *Electronic Music in the Classroom*, issued under the name of D.D. Denham, a fictitious pedagogue teaching a class in experimental music to children.

B for Broadcast

A British avant-pop group active since the mid-1990s. It was initially associated with such bands as Add N to (X) or Stereolab, reviving old recording technologies and archaic electronic instruments in a romantic spirit, but Broadcast stood out for its distinct kind of erudition, skilfully evoking the sounds produced in experimental radio studios, and used in the soundtracks of old sci-fi films, cinema and East European animation. Later the group recorded a fine album with Julian House's The Focus Group (*Broadcast and the Focus Group Investigate Witch Cults of the Radio Age*), thereby entering the territory of hauntology for good. In 2011 Trish Keenan, the charismatic leader of Broadcast, died prematurely; a soundtrack for a film entitled *Berberian Sound Studio* featuring the group was issued posthumously.

B for Boards of Canada

Probably the best musical expression of children's fears. It is a seemingly idyllic sampladelia filled with Sunday morning sunshine, clips of television programmes for the

youngest children and of nature documentaries – and in spite of this, as Simon Reynold says in *Retromania*, “there’s an ominous tinge creeping around the edges of the idyll”.¹

Long before the coining of the term “hauntology” and the popularity of photographic retro-applications like those used with Instagram, Boards of Canada was one of the first groups to employ and popularise the aesthetics of faded, colour pictures now common today, an indistinct nostalgia.

B for Brutalism

Hauntology, at least in its basic, British version, evokes phantoms of a particular time and space. Jim Jupp a.k.a. Belbury Poly, co-founder of the Ghost Box label, estimates that the “hauntological” period falls during the years 1958–1978, preceding the reign of Margaret Thatcher. The construction of the welfare state, utopian urban projects, investments into education and culture, belief in the possibility of reorganizing society are elements of the past which from today’s perspective seems to be a foreign land. This romantic progressivism is best embodied in uncompromisingly modern brutalist architecture and the blocks of flats of modernist housing estates, symbols of a utopia which failed to come into being. Formerly regarded as an embarrassing heritage, the despised and troublesome poetics of concrete has now gained a second life thanks to theorists’ reflections (e.g. Owen Hatherley) and explorations in art (which in Poland is best exemplified by Nicolas Groszpiere).

¹ S. Reynolds, *Retromania*, London 2011, p. 332.

C for The Caretaker

Leyland James Kirby, recording under the name V/VM, turned popular music inside out by placing a ghastly, grotesque mirror before it. His recordings, produced under the name The Caretaker, are as far removed from a satanic giggle as can be, but they are nonetheless disturbing. Initially inspired by Kubrick's *The Shining*, Kirby's enterprise became more complex and penetrating in form. With the aid of distorted clips of recordings from the inter-war period interspersed among ambience passages, The Caretaker attempts to approach the experience of people suffering from memory and consciousness disorders. Both the archaic medium (old gramophone records), and the recordings themselves are used to produce the effect of the uncanny. Due to background noises in the recordings, cheerful dance music and lyrical melodies become vehicles for conveying alienation and fear.

D for Delia Derbyshire

A composer of electronic music and *musique concrete*, whose *oeuvre*, initially anonymous, helped shape the imagination of a generation of listeners. In our compilation, Derbyshire symbolises BBC Radiophonic Workshop, an experimental studio responsible for the creation of soundtracks for hundreds of radio and television productions. During her work for the BBC Delia composed over two hundred pieces, the best known of which is the electronic version of Ron Grainer's motif for the *Doctor Who* series. Together with David Hodgson and David Vorhause,

she formed a group called White Noise, whose recordings were used in horror films issued by Hammer Film Productions. If not for BBC Radiophonic Workshop and later musicians like Derbyshire smuggling avant-garde electronic music into the everyday phonosphere, there would have been no Stereolab, Add N TO (X), or Broadcast, nor any hauntology.

D for Derrida

The concept of hauntology (to haunt and ontology) derives from Jacques Derrida's *Spectres of Marx*. Derrida argues that the condition of civilisation after the end of history is paramount to existence in a world of spectres, entangled traces of the past that will not depart. The concept was borrowed, depoliticised and creatively applied to music-related fields by Mark "k-punk" Fisher,² a writer, critic and essayist, with Simon Reynolds and Adam Harper following in his footsteps.

E for Eastern and Central Europe

For a young British viewer in the 1970s, graphics, cinema and animation from Eastern and Central Europe had an oneiric, surreal and a somewhat frightening tinge. This fascination remains alive, as testified by the fashion for collecting Polish film posters, and websites like 50Watts or SheWalksSoftly, which feature Polish book illustrations, reeditions of Andrzej Żuławski's films, Walerian Borowczyk's animations, and, above all, the cult status of *Varerie and Her Week of Wonders*, a film direct-

2 M. "k-punk" Fisher, *Hauntology Now*, k-punk, 17.01.2006, <http://k-punk.abstractdynamics.org/archives/007230.html> (accessed: 28.03.2013).

ed by Jaromir Jireš, which was the main inspiration for Haha Sound, an album by Broadcast. In 2012, *Kleksploitation* premiered at the Unsound festival in Kraków, Andy Votel's hauntological in spirit variation on the Pan Kleks³ film trilogy with a soundtrack composed by Andrzej Korzyński.

F for Focus Group

A musical project authored by Julian House, a cofounder of Ghost Box. The main source of inspiration was *library music*, an immensely rich world of ready-made pieces recorded by professional composers and artists for radio and television, and early electronic experiments, including sound collages and musique concrete. In 2009, after two well-received albums and one mini album, House recorded in collaboration with Broadcast the hallucinatory, entrancing album *Broadcast and the Focus Group Investigate Witch Cults of the radio Age*, one of the key and most solid publications from the realm of hauntology.

G for Ghost Box

The home base for hauntology as a musical current. Founded by Julian House and Jim Jupp, the record label is characterised by its distinct and coherent image, evoking the aesthetic practices of Manchester-based Factory Records. In the words of its owners, Ghost Box is the result of an interest in Victorian spiritualist séances, British occultism, classic Lovecraft- and Machen-style horror

3 *Pan Kleks* is a Polish trilogy of films for children from the 1980s scored by Andrzej Korzyński, a Polish composer who also wrote the score for Andrzej Żuławski's *Possession* (translator's note)

novels, experiments in early electronic music, television series fringing on fantasy from their youth.⁴ In their music, artists from associated with Ghost Box (The Focus Group, Eric Zann, Belbury Poly) balance between the world of analogue electronics and the possibilities offers by modern sampling. Yet the name *ghost box* refers also to the technological dimension, without which hauntology cannot exist. The Ghost Box, as Jim Jupp explains, is a TV set, but also a half-mythical invention for communicating with the dead that Thomas Edison was said to have been working on.

H for Hypnagogic Pop

To simplify, the American variety of hauntology. A term coined by David Keenan from *The Wire*⁵ referring to the generation of artists who grew in the 1980s, permeated by the mainstream culture of the period, often of the meanest kind: cheap comedies, action films, pop video clips, video games and commercials on local cable TV. In their music, the artists representing this broad trend mix a hodgepodge of different references that are meant to drift as in a half-dream state (hypnagogia), percolated through the not-too-fine filter of suppressed childhood memories. Keenan's definition is broad enough to include artists as diverse as Ariel Pink, Zola Jesus, James Ferraro and Ducktails. *Hypnagogic pop* eventually gave rise to the more distinct, mild and pastel *chill-wave* (Washed Out, Toro Y Moi), which the experience

4 Cf. "Ghost Box is more than a record label", GhostBox, <http://www.ghostbox.co.uk/reviews/fact01.htm> (accessed: 29.03.2013).

5 D. Keenan, "Hypnagogic Pop", *The Wire* 306/2010.

of listening to resembles watching archival teleshopping from the 1990s in a house with a view of a California beach.

H for Julian House

A cofounder of the Ghost Box label responsible for the distinctive artwork used in its releases. The unified design of the album covers evokes Penguin Books publications, but also makes reference to the aesthetics of *library music*. The visual identity is based on abstract, geometrical forms that evoke modernist design, as well as clear and simple colour schemes and restrained typography. House designed album covers for Stereolab, Oasis and Primal Scream. He issues his records under the name Focus Group (and his records naturally come out on the Ghost Box label).

I for interference and Defects

The after-images which occasionally appear in the reception of a television signal are colloquially called “ghosts”. This imperfection, this distortion of reception, is a “gap in reality” through which spectres permeate. These cracks are utilised by hauntology, whose most distinctive feature is bringing out the disturbing, peculiar dimensions of what is seemingly familiar and predictable. A particularly hauntological medium is an obsolete, archaic medium (such as audio- or videotape) because it imparts a new spirit to dead matter.

J for Jacaszek

Or, to be more exact, his first album entitled *Lo-Fi Stories*. Today the elegiac, intimate compositions of Michał Jacaszek put him on a par with such artists as Tim Hecker. However, before his style crystallised, the composer issued a practically pure hauntological album (Jacaszek dubbed his authorial formula of sampling “musicotronics”). The basic building blocks of *Lo-Fi Stories* were radio plays for children. The combination of old-fashioned recordings, sounds emitted by toys, and a collection of live instruments was both entertaining and scary. Jacaszek’s visit to the haunted, cut-out forest has a lot in common with the previously described fascinations of Broadcast – they evoke that part of a child’s imagination in which play coexists with anxiety.

K as K-Punk

Mark Fisher: a writer, publicist, critic, and author of a blog on k-punk on which in 2006 he announced that hauntology (a term borrowed from Jacques Derrida’s writings) was the fittest term to describe the current *Zeitgeist* in culture. “The ghosts are swarming at the moment”, he said. “Why hauntology now? Well, has there ever been a time when finding gaps in the seamless surfaces of ‘reality’ has ever felt more pressing? Excessive presence leaves no traces. Hauntology’s absent present, meanwhile, is *nothing but traces...*”⁶

6 M. “k-punk” Fisher, op. cit.

K for Piotr Kurek

A Polish composer whose publications are a part of cassette revival. He founded a group called *Ślepcy* (The Blind), at present he records music under his own name and as Piętnastka⁷ (Fifteen). He explores the regions of minimal music, psychodelia, and folklore, conflating them in oneiric compositions. On *Heat* Kurek sets off to exotic regions whereas on *Dalia* by Piętnastka we hear familiar Eastern European notes translated into the idiom of electronics, a digital gossamer. The psychodelia tinged by ethnography practised by Kurek evokes the heroic achievements of the artists from the catalogues of Obuh,⁸ and a fondness for found sounds and analogue tones has led him to be associated with a Polish variety of hauntology (ghostology?).

L for Library

A strictly utilitarian music. Anonymous topical recordings (of a particular mood, adjusted to scenes of various kinds) created by professional composers for use on television and radio programmes, and in documentaries and feature films. It is customary for the authors to provide the recordings to sound libraries, transferring all copyrights to them, which means that a particular recording can be used multiple times and in various contexts. Numerous publications of *library music* from the 60s, 70s and 80s have been rediscovered. The albums serve as independent, synthesized recordings characterised by high

7 Piotr Kurek's instrumental project (translator's note).

8 A Polish label releasing avant garde music (translator's note).

quality production, and they are not much different in quality and style from recordings of ambient music.

M for Moon Wiring Club

“Edwardian computer-game music”. One of the best known musical projects related to the hauntology trend. Like Ghost Box, it is characterised by its aesthetic and conceptual coherence and its originality. Moon Wiring Club is an artistic-occult collective residing in the parallel land of Clinkskell and functioning, with the exception of a few periods of turbulence, for over a hundred years. A typically insular spirit of eccentricity, the fascination with spiritualism of the early twentieth century, and the surreal imagination of MWC are combined with catchy, esoteric sampling in the sound layer.

N for Nostalgia

An element seemingly present in hauntology. The musical and aesthetic trends which appeared in the middle of the former decade explore the subject of memory and its structures, but not necessarily in a nostalgic way, as is the case in the mainstream culture characterised by such events as “80s Revival”, tours of bands reactivated after years-long pauses, and music stars returning after long periods of absence, such as Modern Talking or Sandra, the popularity of legendary albums – Metallica’s *Black Album*, Primal Scream’s *Screamadelica* – played live in their entirety during festivals. The difference is the element of a longing for particular phenomena which hauntology or *hypnagogic pop* replace with a childish cognitive mess. At the same time, Simon Reyn-

olds sees hauntology and related phenomena as a part of a broader trend of what he aptly names “retromania”.

O for Obuh Records

A peculiar record company run since the late 1980s by Wojtek Czern, an institution to which the Polish underground is much indebted. Situated in Rogalów, in the area of Lublin, it consistently released recordings of artists who drew inspiration from folklore, alchemical ambient, psychedelia, and postindustrial formulae (Za Siódmą Górą ‘Far, far away’, Księżyc ‘The Moon’, Spear), as well as reeditions of significant though underappreciated records (Krzysztof Penderecki’s score to *The Saragossa Manuscript* directed by Has,⁹ Jerzy Milian’s albums). In his reflections on hauntology, Piotr Kowalczyk has suggested that the artists from Obuh circles can be considered as Polish cousins of Ghost Box. (<http://popjukebox.blogspot.com/2008/07/wakacje-z-duchami.html>).

O for Occultism

Victorian and Edwardian secret societies, spiritualist séances, Aleister Crowley, H.P. Lovecraft, the revival of witchcraft in the 1960s, horror films from Hammer Films, TV shows with paranormal motifs – the supernatural is one of the principal fascinations of the artists associated with hauntology. As the name suggests, it refers to ghosts. As Simon Reynolds rightly observes, an interest in the occult is related to the strictly British nature of hauntology.¹⁰ The esoteric underground in the music from the Isles

9 Wojciech Has, a Polish film director (translator’s note).

10 Op. cit., S. Reynolds, p. 332.

(Current 93, Throbbing Gristle, Coil) was earlier explored by David Keenan in a book entitled *England's Hidden Reverse*. Hauntology, despite its considerable musical and aesthetic remoteness, seems to share common, though decidedly more popculture-erudite, ground with this phenomenon.

P for Public Information Films

Short educational films commissioned by the British government and shown on public TV during commercial breaks warned younger viewers against the dangers threatening them every day. The films reminded viewers to fasten their seatbelts in the car, recommended caution while swimming in a river or crossing the street, and warned against suspicious strangers. Because of their slightly eerie atmosphere, intensified by the soundtrack, the PIFs impressed themselves on the memory of the generation of the 1970s as a mild trauma. The common experience of television scares, before the Board of Canada or artists from the circles of Ghost Box, was alluded to by The Prodigy in their famous recording *Charley* (the phrase "Charley says" is a sample from one of these educational films). The Polish equivalent of these short films, both with respect to its educational character and to its potential to evoke fear in children, would be the anti-drug poster *Kompot kills*,¹¹ seen in almost every medical centre and remembered by the generation born in the first half of the 1980s.

11 "Polish heroin", a home-brewed poppy straw derivative.

S for Sapphire and Steel

British TV series which ran from 1979 to 1982, starring David McCallum and Joanna Lumley. Tales about a pair of time travellers were distinguished by an atmosphere of mystery resembling classic literary *weird stories* and by a mood of terror unparalleled in today's productions for young viewers. Television shows with distinct paranormal motifs like *Sapphire and Steel*, as well as *Children of Stones* or *The Stone Tape*, shaped the imagination of the hauntological generation. The music owes its "haunted" nature to such shows.

S for Sampling

It is for hauntology what *ouija* board is for the occultist, a technological séance. Sampling and collage, used alongside analogue instruments and technologies, is one of the basic methods of composition. Excerpts of found recordings, TV programmes, signals, and musical tropes together form the sound picture that comprises the material of memory.

S for Sangoplasmo Records

A cassette label run by Lubomir Grzelak, former head of the absurdist By?em Kobieta Records (Eng. I W?s a Woman Records) and author of a number of pure nonsense projects from the fringes of electronic and postindustrial music (Quadlibet64, Chłpomania). The label has issued thus far cassettes by The Phantom, Piętnastka, Felicia Atkinson, and Folji, all artists from the fringes of electronic music who do not shy away from experimentation and who give Sango-

plasma its magic-psychedelic character. The label's founder currently makes an original variety of postindustrial music under the name Lutto Lento. The "haunted" sounds dominating the Sangoplasma catalogue and its attachment to an obsolete medium, the cassette tape, situate Sangoplasma in the immediate vicinity of the realms of hauntological.

T for Television

Nothing reflects the character of hauntology better than the ambiguity of the word *medium*, in which technology and esotericism come together. Jim Jupp from Ghost Box Records refers to television as a "ghost box": the phenomenon of televangelists and personas like Anatoly Kashpirovsky or Zbyszek Nowak¹² prove that there is something to this. Hauntology-inflected music is regularly haunted by ghosts from the BBC archives.

U for Umberto

An American representative of a microgenre closely akin to hauntology and hypnagogic pop – cinephile music, which revisits the soundtracks of horror and *giallo* films from the 1970s and 1980s. Its distinguishing characteristic is video nostalgia: an atmosphere of eeriness and fear, characteristic synthesizers, recollections of the thrills of excitement experienced while furtively viewing forbidden films, and above all, the seductive aesthetics of VHS cassettes. Artists whose style is akin to that of Umberto include the duo Zombie Zombie and Antoni Maiovvi, a composer fascinated with the oeuvre of Dario Argento and Andrzej Żuławski.

12 Hypnotists, popular in Poland in the 1990s, who claimed to be able to heal via television.

V for VHS videotape

The video cassette recorder, an absolute fetish of the 1980s (David Croneberg's Videodrome and Kapitan Nemo's *Wideonarkomania*¹³) that was robbed of its short-lived charm by technological progress. VHS cassettes, in competition with DVD and then with digital formats, proved to be a heavy, awkward and cumbersome medium of inferior recording quality. Yet, in spite of these drawbacks, the carrier evokes an emotional attachment and a certain fascination. Artists from hypnagogic pop circles are particularly fond of "trash" tapes, reviving seemingly useless, marginal products of culture – cassettes featuring aerobics workouts or a fifteen-year old accidentally recorded commercial. The aesthetics of video libraries and film covers, the characteristic image distortions or discolourings on poorly made copies constitute a shared idiom for a generation.

W for Wicker Man

A famous horror film directed by Robin Hardy (1973), conflating the essence of the "England's hidden verso" and the occult, neopagan fascinations of the hippie era. The tale of a policeman who finds himself on an island inhabited by the followers of a primal blood cult. The film was known for its strong, symbolical images and memorable scenes, and was particularly valued for its soundtrack with its recognisable *Willow's Song* motif, recorded later repeatedly by younger musicians (Faith and the Muse, Sneaker Pimps).

13 Kapitan Nemo is a Polish vocalist and composer popular in 1980s. "Wideonarkomania" is a song from his first, eponymously titled, album released in 1986.

Abstract

Hauntology is a trend in music, and, more generally, in culture, first defined by Mark Fisher, Simon Reynolds and Adam Harper. It includes artists interested in the exploration of memory in strict relation to media broadcasts (hence the frequent references to radio and television). The alphabet of hauntology is an attempt to review the phenomenon in the form of an alphabetical compilation that includes both its most significant representatives and profiles of those who initiated the trend.

Bio

Olga Drenda (b. 1984) – a journalist and graduate in Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology at the Jagiellonian University. She has published in a number of Polish cultural periodicals and is the author of the blog duchologia.tumblr.com, dedicated to hauntology in Poland.

translated by Joanna Maciulewicz