

TECHNOLOGY AND THE UNCANNY

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“Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic”
– Arthur C. Clarke, *The Independent*, 7 July 2001.

Abstract – Far from empirical science and technological progress dampening the enthusiasm for magical or spiritual readings, the use and improvement of technology trades on the same sense of awe and the uncanny previously provided by mystical phenomena. The symbiotic relationship between technology and the uncanny is not only one of a shared notion of the sublime, but also one of appropriation. This paper discusses the relationship between technology and the uncanny through historical and contemporary examples as well as referencing our own collaborative artist practice.

THE UNCANNY

“The uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” [1]

Modern concepts of the uncanny can be traced back to two major essays: Wilhelm Jentsch’s, ‘On the Psychology of the Uncanny’ (1906), and Freud’s ‘The Uncanny’ (1919). 1919 also saw the release of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, Rutherford’s discovery of the proton, the first episode of the constantly re-animated ‘Itchy and Scratchy’ (according to the internal history of ‘The Simpsons’) and the Theremin invented by its namesake, making it a good year all round. The ‘uncanny’ derives from the German *unheimlich*, loosely seen as meaning ‘un homely’. There are many readings and interpretations of the term, but many centre upon the concept of the animation of apparently inanimate objects, and can be applied to technologies including the animated image, the dislocated and disembodied voice when using a mobile phone, and the ‘uncanny valley’ of cybernetic automata.

However, a base characteristic of the uncanny as argued by both Freud and Jentsch is that it occurs when animate and inanimate objects become confused, when objects behave in a way which imitate life, and thus blur the cultural, psychological and material boundaries between life and death, leading to what Jentsch called ‘Intellectual Uncertainty’ – that things appear not to be what they are, and as such our reasoning may need re-structuring to make sense of the phenomenon.

The simplest and most universal example of this is the reanimation of the dead; ghosts, zombies, poltergeist activity and communication from the ‘other side’ all form part of the psychology of the relationship that the living have towards the dead, and towards their own death. A corpse creates feelings of the uncanny as it is life-like (for it was once alive), and reminds the viewer of his or her own approaching death, the animate imagining the inanimate, and the possibility that the inanimate could be animated again.

CAPTURING THE UNCANNY

The relationship between new technologies and the resurgence of irrational belief is well documented. The development of early photography in the 19th century was not so much hijacked by, but indelibly linked with, the rise of spiritualism. It was the very revolutionary newness of the form which encouraged the spiritually minded to imagine the possibilities of recording events which until that point had remained un-recordable. A market was born, and so entered thousands of visual con artists who manipulated photographic processes to give believers the proof that they had longed for. ‘Spirit Photography’ was a boom industry amongst the early adopters of photography, their double exposures, photomontages and cheese-cloth ectoplasm were hailed by many as the ultimate proof of the afterlife, a strange new technology adapted to provide comfort in a time characterised by threatening industrialisation and social economic transformation. Now, the evidence was recordable, a powerful affirmation of the reality of one phenomenon through the technology of another.

That was then and this now? In his 2000 article Philip Carr stated that when he put ‘ghost orbs’ into an internet search engine he was given over half a million pages, illustrating the popularity of the ghost orb phenomena. On repeating his search seven years later, we discover that ghost orbs seem to have lost none of their appeal, with 1,130,000 suggested pages.

Ghost orbs. Strange, translucent orbs often appear in photographs (particularly digital ones) that had not appeared in the viewfinder when the shot was taken. Often found in images of graveyards, haunted houses and other such spectrally inclined environments. Ghost orbs are hailed by many as the latest way in which the dead are manifesting themselves to the living via new digital technology.

Carr suggests that the dramatic increase of ‘ghost orbs’ in photographs is due to the design of contemporary compact cameras, with the flash placed close to the lens it illuminates dust particles in the air. All but invisible to the naked eye, the particles are too close to the lens to be in focus, but are caught in the split second glare of the flash. Illuminated and enlarged, they appear as translucent balls of light, more than likely the result of the constant striving for smaller technological hardware than manifestations of the dead. With each new technology comes the possibility of measuring, recording and probing phenomena in a new way.

The interesting thing is that every new medium seems to open up a new kind of outside, every new mode of perception leaving out, or even creating, something imperceptible, and on the other hand bringing out something previously out of reach. Erik Davis has named the outside boundary of electronic media as the “electromagnetic imaginary”, meaning that “many animistic or alchemistic notions of essential energies and life spirits have been translated into the concept of electricity, and remain in the technological unconscious.” Machines seem to be inhabiting some kind of life, even as it is an extension of ourselves. The sheer uncanniness of a disembodied voice transmitting via telephone line, as experienced by early telephone users, is quite hard to imagine now, but think of hearing a voice of a recently departed person on an answering machine. [2]

Can it be argued that the advent of digital moving image technologies has given another shot in the arm to spiritualists and charlatans alike? It is true that whether it is

the digital domestic instantaneous production abilities, or Hollywood blue-screen big budget special effects, a sense of the sublime can be created. How well, is of course another matter.



Figure 1. Last Chance for a Slow Dance, *Hollington & Kyprianou*.

In 2002, we made a 10-minute film called ‘Last Chance for a Slow Dance’ which we claimed “... *reflects the investigation of observable phenomena by science and pseudo-science. Playing with new technology and sham séance trickery, the piece questions notions of empirical research: evidence, experience, documentation and simulation...Seemingly ‘poltern’ activity is recorded within an empty room in a derelict house. Continuing in the tradition of theatrical illusionists, fraudulent mediums and cinematic side-shows, we are referencing a cultural phenomenon that is implicitly created by the lack of a visible body. The apparent lack of the performer is mirrored in the poltergeists literal lack of body.*” [3]

What we hoped to achieve was to show how such ‘evidence’ can be faked, by producing a film that only evidences one thing, that it is a film, and so can not be trusted. Framed by the space the activity took place in, we were hoping to give a sense of the haunted media – the media of the recording and of the architecture in which it took place – creating the uncanny through the haunted location trapped (as was the chair by the monitor sitting on it that now showed the ‘documentation’) by the filmed document now seen inhabiting the space.

“Believe none of what you hear, and only half of what you see” [4]

Karl Marx employed the concept of the animation of a lifeless object as a metaphor of the fetishisation of commodification, in which the commodity tends to hide its own history and appear as something natural. Marx used the example of the dancing table, a spectacle in which the table becomes an autonomous object, not the product of labour. What became apparent to us when discussing ‘Last Chance for a Slow Dance’ was that, within the community of digital filmmakers and artists, Marx’s statement, although still pertinent, had to be inverted, and that it was the means of production that was being fetishised.

The majority of people believed that the film was a result of digital trickery, the triumph of post-production over recording. It was hard to convince them the film had no digital effects. Instead, it was made in the tried and tested way, using lighting, framing, sound, and most importantly of all, fishing tackle – all the same tools used by our esteemed Victorian counterparts, and still the bedrock of many magic tricks today, whatever the magicians may say.

So, one could say that the uncanny in this instance, (at least amongst tech savvy types) was created by knowing how it was produced, that one can still make ‘realistic’ ‘special effects’ using physical, analogue means, and in doing so challenge the new digital orthodoxies.

In another piece, shown at Con Art, Site Gallery Sheffield, we were interested in exploring the effects of poltern activity mediated through a semi-thought experiment using “...*new technology that misdirects perception. The image of a wineglass, which never appears to move when viewed through a spyhole, appears in constant motion when relayed to a monitor. The artist challenges us to question the validity of the photographic image as ‘certificate of presence’, but also to be sceptical about what we perceive to be the truth.*” [5]

Values for A New Age again employed séance technology (string, magnets, a trick table) but mediated the experience of a wineglass that actually does move around a table via live CCTV. We were in a sense playing with what interactivity is often used for and attempting to force the audience to question the mediation of the virtual and the real, mimicking the thought experiments of quantum theory.

Mathiesen points out that technology and magic were once part and parcel of the same dark arts, and it is only relatively recently, with the birth of modern scientific method that this has changed: “*observation and experiment were the foundations on which the wall was built that eventually separated the realm of applied science and technology from that of magic.*” [6]

FAREWELL TRANSMISSION

Many of the seemingly rational industrialists of the 19th century were interested in how new technologies could be harnessed for ‘occult’ reasons. Marconi and Edison being two good examples, both believing that radio could be used to contact the dead.

“It is possible to construct an apparatus which will be so delicate that if there are personalities in another existence or sphere who wish to get in touch with us in this existence or sphere, this apparatus will at least give them a better opportunity to express themselves than the tilting tables and raps and Ouija boards and mediums and the other crude methods now purported to be the only means of communication.” [7]

Edison saw the final frontier (death) being opened up by technologies he himself was inventing. With his invention of recordable sound, a new shift was about to take place, a new area of investigation for the spiritualists: Electronic Voice Phenomena (EVP). Until this point, as Khan pointed out, ‘Narcissus possessed better technology than echo’ [8]. From static and ‘ghost voices’ picked up in early radio transmissions, and the accidental recording of seemingly disembodied voices during filming, EVP developed mainly into recordings of empty rooms, manipulated at play back (speeded up, slowed down reversed etc.) until apparent random sound began to sound like a voice. One adherent of EVP went as far as inventing the ‘Spiricom’ a device based on modified radio waves,

which he claimed, offered two-way communication with the dead, although this particular piece of technology seemingly failed to take off. Contemporary followers are turning to the Internet, setting up a website containing databased EVP recordings, in the hope that users may be able to recognise and identify family and friends.

“As I imagine, so I become – and this is the very essence of magic. It comes as no surprise, then, that neopagans and occultists of all descriptions have been quick to embrace the Internet as a new means of communication. For many, the World Wide Web provides a pathway into the mythic conjurings of the world-at-large – an enticing and increasingly seductive means of engaging with the global imagination.” [9]

So, radio, tape recordings, and now, the Internet have been claimed to be able to replace the outdated means of 19th century table rappers. One would have hoped that by now, within our current information and communication systems, some hard proof could have been presented. The transformative nature of technology itself does not carry with it the rationality of a science that makes it possible, as “...*science and religion are distinguished from technology and magic in that the former make claims in the logical form of propositions that may be true or false, whereas the latter need not do so. In semiotic terms, the former are marked for making claims in the form of propositional statements with truth-value, whereas the latter are unmarked in that respect.*” [10]

TELEOLOGICAL DEATH MACHINE

In 2001 we produced piece of work relating to the uncanny, re-animation and voices of the dead, ‘On Heaven as it is on Earth’. On January 28th 1986, the Challenger space shuttle lifted off from Huston. One minute and fifteen seconds into the flight an explosion occurred and was beamed instantaneously around the world. In the ensuing confusion and damage limitation, NASA claimed that all seven astronauts died instantly. However, it has recently been officially accepted that they had survived for roughly two minutes after the explosion. There has been a transcript of the last two minutes of radio contact circulating for years. It could be a fake, but maybe this isn't important. Maybe what is important is that we will never know.

January 28, 1986. Challenger Tape Transcript

The following transcript begins two seconds after NASA's official version ends, with pilot Michael Smith saying ' Uh oh!' Times are approximate, and are shown in minutes and seconds after take off. The sex of the speaker is indicated by M or F.

T+1:15 (M) What Happened? What Happened? Oh God, no-no!
T+1:17 (F) Oh Dear God.
T+1:18 (M) Turn on your air pack! Turn on your air...
T+1:20 (M) Can't Breathe... Choking...
T+1:21(M) Lift up your visor.
T+1:22 (M+F) (Screams) it's hot (sobs) I can't. Don't tell me... God! do it...now...
T+1:24 I told them...I told them.. Damn it ! Resnik don't...
T+1:27 (M) Take it easy! move (unintelligible)...
T+1:28 (F) Don't let me die like this. Not now, not here...
T+1:31 (M) Your arm...no...I (extended garble, static)
T+1:36 (F) I'm...passing...out...
T+1:37 (M) We're not dead yet
T+1:40 (M) If you wanted... (unintelligible)...me a miracle... (unintelligible)... (screams)...
T+1:41 (M) She's...She's... (garble)...damn!

T+1:50 (M) Can't breathe...
T+1:51 (M/F) (screams) Jesus Christ! NO!
T+1:54(M) She's out.
T+1:55(M) Lucky... (unintelligible)
T+1:56(M) God, the water...we're dead (screams)
T+2:00(F) Good-bye (sobs) I love you I love you...
T+2:03(M) Loosen up...Loosen up...
T+2:07(M) It'll be like a ditch landing...
T+2:09(M) That's right, think positive.
T+2:11(M) Ditch procedure...
T+2:14(M) No way!
T+2:17(M) Give me your hand...
T+2:19(M) You awake in there...
T+2:29(M) Our Father... (unintelligible)
T+2:42(M) Hallowed be thy name... (unintelligible)
T+2:58(M) The Lord is my shepherd, I shall...not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures...though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil... I will dwell in the house...
T+3:15 to end static, silence

The short-lived mission was re-animated via a 35mm slide projector. Seven minutes of footage was condensed into 88 slides, with a complete rotation of the carousel lasting one minute and forty seconds. The viewer could go forwards and backwards, re-slicing the already-edited narrative. Like the adored features of the VCR and DVD players, the viewer's favourite moment could be frozen and repeated, constantly delaying and extending the inevitable.

In light of the astronauts 'extended survival', the footage of the Challenger explosion can be seen as documentation of a macabre and spectacular demonstration of 'Schrödinger's Cat'. After the explosion, each frame is a possible end. The evidence, however, is contained, and the conclusion unratifiable. The frames point towards an uncertain and notional state in-between life and death.

A GLITCH IN THE OINTMENT

Buckminster Fuller's concept of 'ephemeralization', "*the principle of doing ever more with ever less weight, time and energy per each given level of functional performance*" [11] can be seen with the ubiquitous embedding of networked technology in daily lives (from all cards with RDIF technology, Oyster cards, Maestro 'loyalty' cards) bundled with readers and databases that track movement, purchases, the objects themselves). As these technologies become more embedded in our daily lives, what is the possibility of the rise of uncanny feeling as a daily experience, as part and parcel of an anxiety-consumer culture literally hooked into these technologies for the efficient and glitch-free operation of daily action?

The year 1999 was always going to be a significant date within any contemporary discussion on technology and the uncanny. The apocalyptic associations of the date were rife. People may have run to the hills, or committed mass suicide in anticipation of the rapture, but the Y2K or 'Millennium Bug' allowed even the most fervent technological secular rationalist in on the scare. Due to memory saving programming within many software applications, computers all around the world were forecast to malfunction at the very start of the year 2000 - leading to chaotic social/economic meltdown. As a result, and echoing the rise of the spirit photography industry a century

earlier, a whole new industry swung into action to capitalise on this ‘glitch’ in new technology, and again with many high profile supporters.

“This is one deadline that is non-negotiable. Normal processes will not meet it. But by treating this as an emergency, we can make Britain one of the worlds best prepared countries for the run up to the new millennium.” [12]

The dawning of the year 2000 did not lead to any major cataclysmic events due to Y2K, however in the immediate period afterwards, the reasons for this were widely debated, and summed up well by Duncan Campbell:

“Never will there be general agreement on whether we escaped massive disruption through magnificent preparedness, or whether the new century’s high priests successfully pulled off a multi-million dollar scam. But one conclusion is sure: the worries we have lived through belong less to technology and more to primal ideas from the collective unconscious.” [13]

Even before the climax of the Y2K techno flap, many specialists had pointed out that if the theory was true, the effects would have already begun, as the change over between the year 1999/2000 was only part of the supposed problem, and malfunctions would have been recorded far earlier. So for the sceptical, another, more nebulous computer technology related crisis was prophesised.

“The FBI and the National Infrastructure Protection Centre advised business that millennial “cyber-terrorists’ and anarchists would try and sabotage computer systems. Some of the UK’s largest companies-Glaxo Wellcome, Vauxhall and Volkswagen- turned off their email, facing reports of a wave of up to 200,000 computer viruses and massed hacker attack.”
[14]

Yet again, this failed to materialise, however the notion of “cyber terrorism” has gained currency, but not necessarily in the way that it was forecast. This time, there was a new ‘spectre haunting Europe’.

THE NEW SPECTRE?

For those without access to licensed electromagnetic broadcast bandwidth the internet has become the *de facto* high profile way of piggy-backing onto traditional media routes and into the heads of those willing to listen or unable to turn off. Here, the ability to disseminate the uncanny as an intentional act of propaganda has most recently come to a head with hostage videos involving to-camera killing, and with from-the-grave video messages such as Cho (Virginia Tech shootings). In the case of Cho, the media hysteria surrounding his posting mid-killing spree, then taken up by traditional media outlets is symptomatic of the effortless use of new technology and a fascination with the ‘myspace’ generation.

In the case of the July 7th bomber, Sidique Khan, (an extract of a video was aired on 2nd September 2005 on BBC1 from a source tape originally from al Jazeera) the disquiet that accompanies a recording of the dead is felt most keenly in the pre-meditated act of a beyond-the-grave message performed to cause an intentional feeling of the uncanny.

CONCLUSION – ENTERING THE UNCANNY VALLEY

With new technologies increasingly becoming quotidian, will the relationship with the uncanny abate? New technologies become assimilated to become an everyday extension of our selves. With newer technologies lining up to take their place, the impact of future technologies however, may also open up a scenario for more of the uncanny to take place.

Possibly the next home for the un-homely can be found in cybernetics, with researchers such as Hiroshi Ishiguro extending the human like appearance and behaviour of robots, and in doing so falling further into what is known as ‘The Uncanny Valley’, the ‘intellectual uncertainty’ and empathic trough humans feel when interfacing with a near human, but noticeably non-human machine. The closer a machine imitates human appearances, the more we find them uncanny, and so there is an implied trajectory that to avoid the uncanny valley, robots will have to become indistinguishable from biological humans in both appearances and behaviour.

“It’s less about recreating a human than making a human compatible being.” [15]

However if scientists and researchers achieve this goal, will this new perfection of ourselves create a new type of uncanny? And will the ability to feel ‘intellectual uncertainty’, and to recognize the uncanny need to be hard wired into robotic empathy circuits in a similar way that they have evolved in ours? If so, when will the first robot believe they have contacted the dead? And if this occurs, how many of us will believe them? Although these questions are yet to be answered, in all probability, someone will believe that cybernetics will offer a new way of contacting or capturing the other side, and in time-honoured tradition, a whole new industry will spring up in response with artists, charlatans and tricksters either leading the way, or in hot pursuit.

We look forward to the day when a fully self-aware empathic artificial intelligence will give us its reading of Freud and Jentsch, and observe whether it finds the human closeness to itself uncanny.

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