

**New Media Hauntings:  
Digital Aesthetics of Haunting, Context Collapse, and Networked  
Spectrality**

A thesis by

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B.A. English and Mass Communications (*cum laude*), M.Sc. Literature and Society:

1688-1900

For the degree of

**Doctor of Philosophy in English**

**November 2017**

### **Acknowledgments**

I am grateful for the opportunity to express my gratitude to my family, friends and colleagues whose generous support, care and expertise made this thesis possible. All thanks go to Catherine Spooner for her exceptional expertise, generosity and patience. Thanks alone do not fully express the depth of my appreciation. It is because of Catherine's guidance and commitment that this research has come to fruition. There are several members of the Department of English Literature and Creative Writing at Lancaster University that I wish to thank for their willingness to engage with my work at various stages of development. Special thanks to Brian Baker for his ongoing support and flexibility, Sara Wasson and Roger Luckhurst. Thank you Lynne Pearce, Adam Fish, Arthur Bradley, Andrew Tate, and Kamilla Elliott for your kind and thorough attention to my work. I am also grateful to Jenn Ashworth, Lindsey Moore, Liz Oakley-Brown, and Keith Hanley for including me in the wider scholastic community, for the stimulating and wide-ranging conversations, the cups of tea and the appreciation of fine baked goods.

A version of chapter three was published in *Gothic and Death* (2017) edited by Carol Margaret Davidson as ' 'I'm not in that thing you know ... I'm remote. I'm in the cloud': networked spectrality in Charlie Brooker's 'Be Right Back', published by Manchester University Press. Early ideas about networked spectrality were published in *Digital Horror: Haunted Technologies, Networked Panic, and the Found Footage Phenomenon*, under the title, 'Networked Spectrality: *In Memorium, Pulse and Beyond*', edited by Linnie Blake and Xavier Aldana Reyes and published by I.B. Tauris. I am humbled to have contributed to these publications.

## New Media Hauntings – Acknowledgements

I have made so many lasting friendships during my time at Lancaster and I am truly enriched by each of you. Special thanks go to Chloe, Alan, Sarah, Sunday, Chris, Xavi, Enrique and Benadetta. I also want to thank my family and friends for helping share the burden, especially Dad and Mel, Wendy and Joel, Sam, the Core, and Paul. To Lucas, thank you for the perspective. To Kylene, thank you for giving me the permission to walk away that has ultimately allowed me to finish.

**Abstract**

**New Media Hauntings:**

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A thesis by Neal Kirk (B.A. English and Mass Communications (cum laude), M.Sc.

Literature and Society: 1688-1900) for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English, November 2017.

This thesis introduces the critical methodology ‘networked spectrality’ to theorise depictions of new media hauntings. Ghost stories often include the latest technologies to establish the realistic setting, but technological advance also affords new opportunities to depict ghost stories. I argue that the early twenty-first-century technologies that are collectively known as ‘new media technologies’ are changing the historic dynamics of ghosts, themes of haunting, and conceptions of spectrality. I use networked spectrality to theorise depictions of ghosts and hauntings in recent films, television programmes, and Internet culture that are transitioning from singular, personal, and analogue representations to ghosts that are multiple, participatory, and immanently digital.

As constitutive and illustrative examples of networked spectrality and new media hauntings, this thesis considers *Ghost* (1990); *Pulse* (2006); the digital aesthetics of haunting employed by the hacker and activist collective, Anonymous (2004 - present); the participatory Internet haunting of The Slender Man (Knudsen, 2009); *Black Mirror* (2011 - present); *Unfriended* (2014), and *CSI: Cyber* (2015- 2016). I use networked spectrality to analyse these texts around the structural concepts of

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the relevant historical, technical, social and political dynamics of digital networks and new media technologies as they relate to conceptions and depictions of haunting.

The identification of the spectral character of data is an important outcome of my application of networked spectrality because it enables proficient users, hackers, and agents of the State to blur the roles traditionally afforded to ghosts, themes of haunting and spectrality. From the spectral architecture of the Internet, to the changes in social behaviour, to the way new media technologies are used to shape politics and policing, networked spectrality offers insights into the cultural work the theme of haunting is evoked to do.

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**New Media Hauntings:**

**Digital Aesthetics of Haunting, Context Collapse, and Networked Spectrality**

**<Boot Launch>//: Error – Do you want to meet a ghost?**

The early years of Facebook being open to the public were marked by aggressive efforts to build the user base. There were people-you-may-know algorithms that would occasionally suggest new friends and encourage posts on existing Friends' pages. These algorithms reflected CEO Mark Zuckerberg's belief in radical transparency: Facebook would be a community for users to present their real self – a position that would eventually require users to use only their real names. But the algorithms soon ran into the reality of human mortality as they connected living users with the still-active profile pages of friends that had passed away. The seed of my focus on new media hauntings in this thesis grew out my personal experiences and informal conversations with others as we encountered the mediated remains of the digital dead.

In the small sample size of my personal discussions, only a few people treated the pages as a virtual memorial. These few actively sought out the pages of the deceased as a way of remembering, posting shared memories and in-jokes, and offering condolences to living family or friends. But the clear majority of people I spoke with described the experience as 'creepy'. People seemed to intuitively frame the experience as a type of haunting: a personal encounter with the long-standing 'ghost in the machine' trope. Contemplating the death rituals of a generation more apt to take, post, archive, and share digital mementos online led me to a central question of this thesis: does a new media technological context indicate a new

dynamic for the theme of haunting, or is it the latest iteration of a familiar set of tropes, recognisable from the literary ghost story and the horror film?

In this thesis, I contend that the early twenty-first-century technologies – the computers, smart phones and watches, tablets, mobile and Internet networks, social media platforms and more – that are collectively known as ‘new media technologies’ *are* changing the historic dynamics of ghosts, themes of haunting, and conceptions of spectrality. But the existing scholastic paradigms do not satisfactorily account for the subtleties of those new dynamics. Post-modernism, specifically the advent of deconstruction and post-structuralism, marks a division in ghost scholarship: the epoch of literary analysis built upon the legacy of the ‘Golden Age’ Victorian ghost stories and informed by psychoanalysis gives way to the critical vogue of Jacques Derrida’s (1994) now infamous pun on the phantom structures of contemporary being, *hauntology*. I am not satisfied with existing scholarship from either approach because I find neither adequately accounts for the new types of haunting that the digital new media ecology has fostered. In this thesis, I develop networked spectrality as a more specific critical methodology to better interrogate the nuances of contemporary depictions of media hauntings, which reflect both the structural characteristics and social use of new media technologies.

In looking at how ghosts are being represented by, and in relation to, the latest technologies and in my assertion of a new type of media haunting, I break the concept of haunting into its constitutive parts in a process I call identifying the ‘spectral mechanics’. Spectral mechanics include the historical, literary, theoretical and social concepts that structure how the figure of the ghost and conceptions of haunting are articulated and understood. I use ‘networked mechanics’ in a similar

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sense, to indicate how media theorists discuss the technical and social affordances of new media technologies. Networked spectrality is the combination of my careful focus on spectral mechanics and an analysis of the structural components of how networks function; network mechanics and spectral mechanics combine into my term, networked spectrality.

I use networked spectrality to theorise depictions of ghosts and hauntings in recent films, television programmes, and Internet culture that are transitioning from singular, personal, and analogue representations to ghosts that are multiple, participatory, and immanently digital. Using a cross-section of examples from 1990 to the present, this thesis addresses the tropes of an identifiable current of contemporary narratives depicting the relationship between spectrality and the latest digital technologies that I call 'new media hauntings'. I am indebted to Jeffrey Sconce's landmark study, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (2000), for his analysis of early telegraphy, radio, television and film that are the precursors of my focus on new media hauntings.

As constitutive and illustrative examples of networked spectrality and new media hauntings, this thesis considers *Ghost* (1990); *Pulse* (2006); the digital aesthetics of haunting employed by the hacker and activist collective, Anonymous (2004 - present); the participatory Internet haunting of The Slender Man (Knudsen, 2009); *Black Mirror* (2011 - present); *Unfriended* (2014), and *CSI: Cyber* (2015- 2016). I use networked spectrality to analyse these texts around the structural concepts of the relevant historical, technical, social and political dynamics of digital networks and new media technologies as they relate to conceptions and depictions of haunting.

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Despite a recent glut of cultural products that depict new media hauntings, I do not use the term to indicate a genre as such. Genre demarcations serve a utilitarian purpose as a general means of classification, but the constituent parts of any given genre are often arbitrary. I am less interested in what should be included or excluded or in the identification of a series of consistent formal features and more interested in the cultural work depictions of new media haunting are doing.

Therefore, my focus is less on the implications of new media hauntings for other genres and genre theory and more focused on how new media technologies are being depicted as, and are depicting, the latest sites of haunting. I consider the concepts represented by my 'new media hauntings' grouping as drawing on and cutting across several established genres including Drama, Romance, Crime, Science Fiction, Horror and Gothic.

To that end, my sample includes low budget, independent productions as well as Hollywood blockbusters. It includes cultural products that have migrated from humble beginnings to comparative financial success like the crowd-sourced online horror meme, Slender Man, which now occupies the complex grey zone between capital gain, copyright and collective creativity. I have represented texts ranging from popular reception to critical acclaim, and this sample reflects my personal preferences as a fan of ghost stories and horror films. To some degree this list, but also my analysis and my general relationship to film and television, is informed by my professional experience working in the media industry. I have worked in nearly every aspect of radio, television, and film across a range of independent and mainstream productions. My experience making media widens my

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focus beyond a consideration of the text alone, allowing me to provide insights about the entire production process from conception to distribution.

Because I can only cast the net so wide in this thesis, in selecting a representative sample, there are some omissions. To name only a few, I have not included ghost comedies and parodies, ghost hunter programmes and reality TV treatments, animated films, children's content, or videogames that engage with these themes. Also, I have only included a tiny fraction of the horror memes that span the contemporary digital mediascape. It is my hope that future researchers can address these iterations of new media hauntings through the terms of networked spectrality that I set up here. In that regard, I am aware that the overall scope of this sample remains predominantly Anglocentric, especially as I specifically focus on the American remake of *Pulse* rather than Kiyoshi Kurosawa's Japanese 'J' Horror original, *Kairo* (2001).

The statistics about Internet access in 2017 would appear to bear out a general cultural perception of the omnipresence of technology in daily life especially in developed nations. Just over half the world population use the Internet. When broken down by region, however, Internet usage in the Anglocentric 'West' is a fraction of the usage numbers in Asia: just under half the population of Asia uses the Internet, compared to 17% of Europe, and only around 8% of North America (Miniwatts Marketing Group, data from June 30, 2017). These statistics complicate the popular perception of the Internet as distinctly Western even as English remains the *defacto* language (Curran, 2016). The reasons for this imbalance between perceived usage and actual usage are not a specific focus of this thesis, but are an important context to consider. While acknowledging the digital divide (Norris, 2001)

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is as potent a topic now as ever, and recognizing the potential for vastly different local conceptions of haunting around the world, part of what looking at this sample shows is the predominantly developed, Western focus that continues to surround narratives of technological advance *despite* the increasingly global scope of new media technology use. Many of the texts I consider in this thesis assume a distinct sense of Western, and often specifically American, technological entitlement.

Despite its suggestive global character, availability and accessibility, the cultural and economic capital of digital culture remain consolidated in the West: The Googleplex, Google's headquarters, are in Santa Clara, California, and Microsoft's main offices are located at One Microsoft Way in Redmond, Washington. These are just two of the titans of 'Silicon Valley', a name that is increasingly detached from a specific region of California, but nevertheless remains distinctly American.

I link the terms 'new media' and 'hauntings' in a general sense in this thesis, to highlight how the wedge between the widespread use of new media technologies and the distance between cultural awareness of the material factors of those technologies is characterised in the social imagination as spectral. Cultural researcher danah boyd [*sic*] (2010a; 2014) articulates the combination of how the technologies work and their social use as structural affordances of networked publics. In this thesis, I argue new media technologies are depicted as spectral in character *because* of their structural affordances and that the new media ecology reinforces the spectral characterisation of media use. There are many historical, technical, social, and political contexts of digital new media technologies, the Internet, and network structure that strengthen associations with the spectral. If new media use is increasingly global, so too is the technical infrastructure that provides access: fibre

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cable networks, Wi-Fi satellites, and the server farms that enable the expansive data networks and data clouds. Likewise, the social and political infrastructures around new media technology use are also significant. Over 3.8 billion users of new media technologies expect access but do not necessarily know or understand what that access entails at the technical, social, and political levels.

The scope of networked spectrality in this thesis is to incorporate existing literary and film history, theory and criticism with the latest debates in digital media studies – a crucial element of the discussion about the relationship between technology and spectrality that is only recently garnering scholastic attention. As mentioned, my position as academic and professional in the new media technology industry informs my development of networked spectrality as a critical paradigm. To demonstrate the nuances of networked spectrality, I will review key theories of ghosts, hauntings, and spectrality, then consider the media theory, including the affordances of networked publics, upon which I also draw. Lastly, I will summarise the role networked spectrality plays in each of the chapters of this thesis.

### **Updating Traditional Spectral Mechanics**

Julia Briggs' (1977) pioneering work on the ghost story, with its emphasis on Freud and the uncanny, is the foundation upon which nearly all subsequent treatments of the ghost in literary scholarship are built. It is through her identification of the formulaic structure of the traditional ghost story that the extent to which contemporary iterations have progressed can be measured. Establishing the most fundamental characteristics of the genre, Briggs puts a credible, naturalistic setting, disrupted by the appearance of a ghost, at the foundation of the genre's



identifiable structure. Michael Cox and R. A. Gilbert identify the formal conventions of the ghost story as a set of mutual expectations between the author and the audience, the success of which 'depends on using conventions creatively' (1991, p. xi). 'The skill comes', they continue, 'when an author is able to work closely within the limited conventions of the form whilst at the same time reassembling familiar components into something that can still engage and surprise' (p. xi). This dynamic has led many scholars and authors to consider the ghost story as an exercise in adhering to the long-established conventions of the form (Briggs (1977, 2000; Cox and Gilbert, 1991; Smith, 2007, 2013).

Throughout this thesis, I use the terms 'traditional ghost story' to evoke historically popular ghost stories and 'traditional spectral mechanics' to indicate the literary, philosophical, and critical history of ghosts, hauntings, and spectrality that begins with Briggs. I consider the term 'traditional' more than just an arbitrary scholastic division however, because a recognizable core of thematic elements has emerged and endured throughout the modern history of the ghost story. Aspects of that evolution remain evident even when depicted across a range of contemporary media. I base this claim on the literary, rather than folkloric, conceptions of ghosts as they emerged in the early modern period stemming from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, and evolved through their relationship with film into their contemporary guise.

In the most general terms, traditional spectral mechanics are governed by what Briggs calls an 'illogical logic' (1977, p. 16): an 'alternative structure of cause and effect' in which 'the supernatural is not explained away but offers its own pseudo-explanation according to some kind of spiritual law of action and reaction'

(2000, p. 123). The pseudo-explanation, the illogical logic that set the spectral conditions also incorporates revenge as a central motif of the form. 'If a ghost walks,' according to Briggs, 'it is because its owner has not been buried with due ceremony, because he has to atone for some great sin, or perhaps to warn, or provide information concealed during life' (1977, pp. 15-16). Even the fringe cases where ghosts warn or protect are usually bound or contained by certain conditions that set the spectral parameters of the ghost's return. According to traditional spectral mechanics, ghosts haunt specific people, places or things. Thus, a spectre of the past confounds the present as it returns to complete unfinished business and get revenge, often in a form appropriate to the specific conditions of its death and return.

Reading ghosts as metaphors for primal drives, or as the encroachment of a 'vengeful past' (Cox and Gilbert, 1991, p. ix) into the present has clear theoretical links with Freud's psychoanalytical term, the return of the repressed. Because Briggs finds the ghost story so often occupied with the 'tension between the cosy familiar world of life (associated with *Heim* and *heimisch*—home and the domestic) and the mysterious and unknowable world of death (*unheimlich*, or uncanny)' (2000, p. 126), she suggests that it anticipated much of Sigmund Freud's efforts to understand the workings of the human mind. Briggs' use of Freud to read ghosts and hauntings can be placed in the wider critical paradigm of the early 1980s dominated by psychoanalysis. Indeed, many of Freud's key concepts including the return of the repressed, the uncanny, the pleasure and death drives, and his work on mourning and melancholia, have been challenged in more recent ghost scholarship. But even as the critical moment tends to look past Freud, he still offers an important

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foundation to the psychological effects of loss and grief, which could be considered as social manifestations of the concepts of spectrality and haunting (Gordon, 1997).

Ghost stories often include the latest technologies as a means of establishing realistic, natural settings, but technological advance also affords new opportunities to depict ghost stories. As such, new technological developments have characteristically been bound up with the theme of haunting throughout the history of the ghost story. Written letters, found documents, frame narratives and framing devices, many of which are understood as related to the latest technologies through the 'ghost in the machine' trope, are common to the Victorian 'Golden Age' of ghost stories (see Briggs, 1977; Cox and Gilbert, 1991). In 'The End of the Passage' (1890), Rudyard Kipling uses the Kodak camera both to establish a credible setting for his nineteenth century readers, and as a locus of the supernatural. Barry Pain's 'The Case of Vincent Pyrwhit' (1901) is an early twentieth-century example in which the new technology of the telephone is the conduit of ghostly communication.

Until the rise of digital new media technologies, nowhere has the relationship between technology and spectrality been more cherished than in the cinema. As predecessors to the medium of film, late-nineteenth-century spirit photography, phantasmagoria, magic lantern shows (Jones, 2011), the practice of reading Christmas ghost stories aloud in the Victorian drawing room (Briggs, 1977; Cox and Gilbert, 1991) and the popularity of public séances, all establish an inherently supernatural relationship at the heart of cinema. In his seminal study, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television*, Jeffrey Sconce (2000) observes the historical cultural association between technological advance and the theme of haunting from the advent of the telegraph, through its cultural and critical

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dominance in film, and extension to television. Sconce attributes the first instance of haunted media to the telegraph because its technical affordances mimicked the mediumship of the séance. Sconce argues that the desire to communicate with the dead manifested in the Victorian socio-cultural imagination as a form of 'spiritual telegraph' (2000, p. 12, see also pp. 21-58), paralleling the technical functionality of relaying messages at effectively instant communication across time and space afforded by the telegraph. Extrapolating these ideas, cinema's unique capacity to represent the immateriality of the ghost in projected light, has shot the entire history of film through with associations of the spectral.

As Linda Badley (1995) argues in her analysis of American ghost story films of the 1980s and 90s, as ghost stories migrate from literary to audio/visual media, they become more self-conscious of how to represent the spectral in those new media environments. Advancements in special effects technologies in the 1980s, Badley observes, helped enable the representation of ghost characters and ghost subjectivities, focusing on the ontological experience of *being* a ghost rather than producing readings she considers 'hauntings of the surfaces' (p.45), topical critical readings rooted in psychoanalysis. Murry Leeder's, *Cinematic Ghosts: Haunting and Spectrality from Silent Cinema to the Digital Era* (2015), provides a comprehensive overview of the historical and technical advancements to both the medium of film and the representation of ghosts.

Sconce's driving question in *Haunted Media* is also a structural question of this thesis: why after more than 150 years of technological advance are the latest technologies still considered a source and site of haunting in the cultural imagination? Implicit in the historical association between ghosts and technology is

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the subtler question undertaken by this thesis: to what extent does the concept of haunting change with each migration to a new technology? Is the culturally accepted 'definition' of haunting comparatively static or does its constant association with the latest technologies change the steadfast notion of haunting? Sconce is invaluable in establishing the terms of the continuing debate because he sees the first and all subsequent constructions of haunted media streaming from what he calls 'electronic presence': the flowing, animating, yet invisible qualities of electricity.

In *Haunted Media*, Sconce identifies three aspects of communications technologies that suggest a spectral electronic 'liveness': profound disembodiment, the 'electronic elsewhere' of the sovereign electronic world, and the anthropomorphizing of media technologies (2000, pp. 8-9). The electronic presence of the Internet incorporates all three of these recurring historic fictions, accompanied by both utopian (technophilic) and dystopian (technophobic) cultural attitudes. Throughout *Haunted Media*, Sconce gestures toward the impact of computers, the Internet, and new media, but is generally focused on television as he considered it poised at the beginning of the new millennium to overtake the historic popular and critical dominance of film. It is premature to say where new media falls in terms of popular use and scholastic hierarchies, especially since Sconce accurately predicted the surge of interest in television that has arguably increased over the past twenty years. But as new media technologies jockey for position in the contemporary media ecology, Sconce's dual critique of post-modern scholarship and early technophilic Internet-centrism, which he discusses as an over-general belief in what he terms the 'postmodern occult' (p. 182), is a formative component in my development of networked spectrality.

### **Haunted Media, the Postmodern Occult, and the Spectral Turn**

Briggs establishes the identifiable set of rules that historically govern ghosts including the formal tension between innovation and adherence to convention and an emphasis on Freud and the uncanny. Accordingly, traditional spectral mechanics construct the ghost as a shifting metaphor for a range of topics and concerns, while ensuring each iteration remains recognisable as a ghost story. The elasticity of the ghost figure, and the general concept of haunting, has resulted in a multitude of useful scholastic interpretations: Smith's exploration of ghostly economic presences and absences, as well as the socially liberating possibilities that can result from putting a ghost to rest (2007); or recent interpretations that read the ghost in terms of their historical and political implications (Hay, 2011); or models that understand ghosts as related to historical traumas (Hay, 2011; Blake, 2012). The majority of critical interpretations tend to be dominated by links to Freud, psychoanalysis, and the uncanny until beginning in the 1980s Jean Baudrillard and Jacques Derrida began theorising ghosts, hauntings, and death in relation to the complexities of semiotics, symbolic exchange values, and structures of representations.

The impact of Derrida's articulation of hauntology on ghost scholarship has been far reaching. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida coins the pun on ontology, hauntology, writing:

To haunt does not mean to be present, and it is necessary to introduce haunting into the very construction of a concept. Of every concept, beginning with the concepts of being and time. That is what we would be calling here a

hauntology. Ontology opposes it only in a movement of exorcism. Ontology is a conjuration. (1994, p. 161)

In an update to her findings on the ghost, Briggs (2000) acknowledges the scholastic paradigm shifting towards Derrida as a potential post-Freudian account of ghostly returns writing that,

many of the most characteristic motifs of the ghost story, even the very ghosts themselves, are reproductions or simulacra of human beings, and many other figures that appear in ghost stories [...] are all different forms of reproduction, [...] the concept of uncanniness itself is closely connected to disturbing interpretations and the discovery of resisted meanings. (pp. 124-125)

Derrida's conception of hauntology and its critical vogue in the early 2000s set about (de)constructing the figure of a ghost as a complex temporal and material present absence.

The post-structuralist treatment of the ghost reinforced the intimate historic relationship between ghosts and technology in a period of rapid technological innovation, and simultaneously, thoroughly, abstracted the figure of the ghost from its close relationship to people, places, and specific material objects. It also abstracted the ghost from its relationship with the dead. In the traditional ghost story, where Briggs saw direct access to the reader and appeals to a cause and effect logic however supernaturally illogical, the treatment of the ghost in deconstructionist, post-structuralist, postmodern theory, was purely theoretical, asynchronous ('out of joint' as Derrida quoted from *Hamlet*, 1994, p. 1), and a harbinger of the schizophrenic hybridity of the postmodern condition. Musing about

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ghosts and his role in Ken McMullen's film *Ghost Dance* (1989) Derrida said in an interview:

Contrary to what we might believe, the experience of ghosts is not tied to a bygone historical period, like the landscape of Scottish manors, etc., but ... is accentuated, accelerated by modern technologies like film, television, the telephone. These technologies inhabit, as it were, a phantom structure ... When the very *first* perception of an image is linked to a structure of reproduction, then we are dealing with the realm of phantoms. (Derrida, 1989, p. 61)

Derrida has been influential in initiating postmodern debates about spectrality. Dealing with the phantom realm, and exploring the phantom structure of the relationship between ghosts, hauntings, and technology came to dominate scholarship in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Ghosts were on the radio, on the television, and in the cinema. Ghost seeing, ghost reading, ghost writing, and ghost scholarship reflected the steady drive of technological advance with its characteristic technophobic and technophilic social responses. Nevertheless, despite Derrida opening the field to explorations of the relationship between literature and technology, scholars have become increasingly critical of crude applications of his approach (Sconce, 2000; Luckhurst, 2002; Warwick, 2007; Hay, 2011).

One difficulty in considering the figure of the ghost as a present absence is that it further dissociates it from the material context suggested by traditional spectral mechanics and abstracts the concept into linguistic flourishes, the rhetorical logic of the supplement, and disjointed emotional temporalities. I am contributing



networked spectrality as a means of adding nuance and specificity to the overlapping themes of technology and spectrality. I am trying to return the focus to the material, historical, social, and political that have been caught up in the process of scholastic deconstruction. The merits of deconstruction are in its role in initiating new debates about spectrality and technology, but it risks overlooking key contexts and favouring a thought economy over the material.

Responding to the work of postmodern theorists including Guy DeBord, Fredric Jameson, and especially Baudrillard, Sconce considers the prospect of the dissolution of the boundaries between the real and virtual as postmodern theory rarefying 'a series of long-circulating superstitions bound to the historical imaginations of electronic presence' (2000, p. 170). According to Sconce the resulting narrative from postmodern theory about human consciousness is:

Where once there was the 'real,' there is now only the electronic generation and circulation of almost supernatural simulations. Where there was once stable human consciousness, there are now only the ghosts of fragmented, decentered, and increasingly schizophrenic subjectivities. [...] Where there was once 'meaning,' 'history,' and a solid realm of 'signifieds,' there is now only a haunted landscape of vacant and shifting signifiers. (pp. 170 -171)

Sconce critiques postmodern theories of this nature as the 'postmodern occult' (p. 182).

Scholars that tip over into the 'postmodern occult' tend to construct the wholly sovereign mediated reality distinct from lived social experience in abstract, theoretical or philosophical terms. Sconce considers arguments by Baudrillard and other postmodern critics as employing a rhetorical flourish whereby the previously

distinct binaries of real and virtual become 'infinitely reversible' (p. 180). Figured as the ultimate electronic elsewhere and barely a shot away from belief in the supernatural, Sconce argues that 'the most thriving form of the postmodern occult has arisen from this gradual reification of Baudrillard's enigmatic maxims and reversible binaries, producing a mediascape that is no longer seen as metaphorically more real than the real – but is addressed as a genuinely paranormal replacement of the real, as if simulation were a material transformation rather than a semiotic process' (p. 182).

Julian Wolfreys' (2001) post-structuralist analysis of spectrality, the gothic and the uncanny in Victorian literature is the ultimate indication of how general the theoretical abstraction of the concept of haunting had become: 'all stories are, more or less, ghost stories. And, to reiterate another principle: all forms of narrative are, in one way or another, haunted' (p. 3). Writing during the same period, Wolfreys' publication after Sconce spares him any direct ire, but Wolfreys claim demonstrates the shape unchecked enthusiasm for the postmodern occult in scholarship can take. If all narratives, across all media, if every facet of being is haunted, then the cultural work the concept of haunting does is diminished. But as Sconce observes, ghosts and themes of haunting remain intimately connected with contemporary media ecologies in the cultural imagination.

*Haunted Media* was published in 2000 meaning that Sconce was writing in a particularly hopeful moment about technical innovation, but also an especially anxious one. James Curran (2016), evaluates many of the prominent Internet-centric, technophilic hopes that circulated during the pre- and post-millennial phase of Internet development and (commercial) deployment. In a then and now analysis he

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dispels the early technophilic euphoria by drawing attention to the political, material, economic, and social conditions that have settled around the contemporary new media ecology. In the Internet's infancy, all sorts of technophilic responses swirled around, including the belief that the digital medium would finally shatter inequalities of gender, race, class and so on. For example, in his 1995 book, *The Road Ahead*, then CEO and founder of Microsoft Bill Gates imagined with the onset of the Internet the realization of an ideal, friction-free capitalism. Gates is currently among the wealthiest individuals in the world, suggesting the historic consolidation of capital rather than the imagined equal playing field small businesses might use the Internet to access. Around the same time, United States Vice President, Al Gore, predicted that with Internet connectivity: 'we will derive robust and sustainable economic progress, strong democracies, better solutions to global and local environmental challenges, improved health care, and—ultimately—a greater sense of shared stewardship of our small planet' (1994).

Perhaps the most extreme claim about the impact of the internet and its projected democratizing effect can be drawn from Francis Fukuyama's (1989) position that, 'liberal democracies may constitute the "end point of mankind's ideological evolution" and the "final form of human government," and as such, [...] the end of history' (2006, p. xi). Like predictions about the television, the Internet was hailed as the coming of a Golden Age of Democracy. The internet-centrism that Curran considers at the heart of most of these prophecies mimics the technological deterministic belief that future technologies will solve the problems of the present. Unchecked technological determinism is technophilia at its worst, a poignant factor of Sconce's 'postmodern occult' critique. Concluding *Haunted Media*, Sconce

bemoans a prominent current of technophilic cybertheory in the early 2000s that approached new media technologies, 'as if *subjectivity, identity, and fantasy* were equivalent and interchangeable terms (when, of course, they are not)' (p. 208). Apart from neglecting the socio-cultural and historical contexts, these theories routinely failed to consider the material factors of the advancing new media technologies.

The critical vogue of hauntology and the resulting lack of specificity about haunting lead Roger Luckhurst (2002) to brand the prioritisation of 'postmodern occult' scholastic interpretations a problematic, overbroad 'spectral turn'. In 'The Contemporary London Gothic and the Limits of the 'Spectral Turn'', Luckhurst suggests that rather than a project of abstraction, attention should be paid to the 'specific symptomatology'; that scholars should crack open the present absences of the ghost in an effort to situate the ghost in its specific context (p. 542). I have been persuaded by Luckhurst's arguments for a return of focus on the specific, local characteristics of ghosts and I offer networked spectrality as an alternative to the spectral turn. In doing so, I position myself among other recent scholastic interpretations of ghosts and hauntings which also explore historical, political, economic, social mobility and trauma models of spectrality.

Several scholars, working on contemporary ghosts and how they overlap with digital technologies and their aesthetics can be connected through their responses to Luckhurst (Hay, 2011; Olivier, 2015). Broadly, a concern with presence and absence, what Isabella van Elferen calls the 'material informational' dichotomy (2009, p. 99), the continued agency of the dead, complex temporalities and the importance of memory and the navigation of grief, make up the spectral mechanics upon which networked spectrality builds. Paying attention to how networks actually work, as

opposed to the technophilic and technophobic responses that imagine how they might work, is a crucial element in the development of my theory of networked spectrality.

### **Moral Panic, Social Anxiety Readings and Cloud Gothic**

One important point in introducing how networked spectrality works to address the diverse range of themes and cultural products in my sample, is that as representations of new media hauntings, they tend to depict the overlap of technology and haunting in terms of technophobia and moral panic. Media scholars understand that the latest technologies are frequently the subject of moral panic (see Cohen, 2002; Glassner, 2010; boyd, 2012, 2014), reinforcing technophobic attitudes. For example, cyberbullying remains among the chief social anxieties about contemporary new media technologies. On this point, boyd (2012, 2014) repeatedly laments that the hold moral panic has over socio-cultural attitudes about technology is not easy to dispel with facts. Many recent media scholars are trying to dispel moral panic by situating the social effects of new media technology use in their specific contexts. Yet, the idea that new technologies are associated with unknown hopes and fears remains the pervasive popular and scholastic position: a topical dichotomy between technophilia and technophobia.

Laura Mulvey (2006), for example, terms depictions of the possible negative effects of technology as a navigation of the 'technological uncanny'. For Mulvey, the technological uncanny refers to the cultural unease that surrounds any new medium, similar to the expression of cultural unease moral panics express about new technologies. But in Mulvey's articulation of the term, the anxiety of the

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technological uncanny fades as the new technology settles into social familiarity and widespread use. Digital new media technologies, and the fears that accompany them, challenge the position that cultural fear surrounding technologies diminishes with familiarity. The taming of cultural fears surrounding technology may be related to government regulation; as Wu points out in *The Master Switch* (2010), all media technologies are partly tamed by regulation. Digital technologies have incredibly wide-reaching effects on contemporary social life, but rather than dispelling the uncanny with familiarity, boyd (2012) finds that the Internet is *amplifying* cultural fears that are enabled by the attention economies being produced by contemporary networked publics. For most of the examples in my sample, the latest technologies are actively depicted as both site and source of cultural fear. But where Mulvey finds technologies especially uncanny at their onset, boyd maintains that digital new media attention economies provide a seemingly perpetual ‘fertile ground for the culture of fear’ (2012). In the new media ecology, fear is restructured as an especially effective way to garner attention.

For many scholars and content producers, gothic cultural products have historically been, and continue to be, the means of navigating identifiable social anxieties of the age. Indeed, depictions of new media hauntings often anticipate their own reception according to the social anxieties they depict and the fears they suggest, a general point Chris Baldick and Robert Mighall (2012) observe in their critique of scholarship that reads gothic texts as a means of navigating cultural anxieties. ‘Since Gothic horror fiction has a *generic obligation* to evoke or produce fear,’ they write, ‘it is in principle the *least* reliable index of supposedly “widespread” anxieties’ (p. 280, emphasis in the original). Despite Baldick and Mighall’s critique

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and call for better historical specificity from scholarship, the longstanding relationship between technology and spectrality and the historic technophilic and technophobic cultural attitudes about new technologies produce a tendency towards social anxiety readings. One reason for this is that frequently the failings of technological determinism paved the way for technophobic and gothic responses. The widespread technophilic claims about the Internet and new media technologies that circulated in the 1990s have largely not come to pass, providing fertile ground for programmes like *Black Mirror* (2011- ongoing) to express a cynicism and renewed interest in the failings and shortcomings of technology. Ghosts still lend themselves to Hollywood film treatments like *Pulse* (2006), or the immanent digital ghost of *Unfriended* (2014), that depict technological advance as a technophobic cautionary tale.

In her early efforts at theorising the 'cybergothic', Isabella van Elferen (2009) considers the genre of gothic fiction as the means of negotiating cultural anxieties wrought from developing technologies. Van Elferen uses the Gothic to approach cyberspace because she finds that

we live in an age of technocultural crisis in which the presence of non-human agents has rendered our familiar world uncanny by shaking our notions of reality and humanity. Since the eighteenth century the Gothic has served as a signifier of such cultural crisis and negotiated the anxieties that accompany them through an active confrontation with feelings of unease. (p. 100)

Her approach is mostly unchanged in her essay *Techno-Gothics of the early-twenty-first century: 'Cultural responses to late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first century technological developments have produced three new Gothic specters'* (van Elferen,

2014, p. 138). These new gothic specters are, 'all-too human machines [...] the incorporation of the machine-based (or the machinic) into the human [... and] the techno-human hybrid in which technological and human provenance have been amalgamated into a new type of being, the indistinguishable Third that is neither Self nor Other but an uncanny blend of both' (pp. 138-139). Van Elferen's focus on 'the ways in which early-twenty-first century technological developments transform Gothic fiction and film' (p. 138) suggests some similarities between the three new techno-gothic genres she identifies as 'singularity Gothic, cloud Gothic, and weird Gothic' (p. 138), and networked spectrality but there are also crucial methodological and disciplinary differences.

Both van Elferen's techno-Gothic modes and my concept of networked spectrality address cultural responses to contemporary technological developments through works of fiction. Van Elferen's approach routinely returns to the philosophical, the psychological and the abstract. As such, her ideas tend towards the scholastic processes of abstraction that I am resisting through networked spectrality. The questions van Elferen is using fiction to address place her in the Baudrillardian, 'postmodern occult' camp: '[t]he impossibility of proving the existence of reality as theorized by Baudrillard is an increasingly important theme in singularity Gothic narratives' (p. 141). This deep commitment to postmodern deconstruction theory drives van Elferen toward the philosophical rather than the cultural or material.

Van Elferen's articulation of cloud Gothic, which of her three modes would seem to be the most comparable to networked spectrality, ultimately limits its own



applicability to a conception of fiction seemingly outside of cultural materialist methodologies:

Aided by its own dependence on mediality and fictionality, cloud Gothic keeps articulating the same haunting suspicions, the same discomfoting questions pertaining to the ontology and epistemology of technoculture: What is reality and how can I know it? It provides no answers to these questions; it merely insists on them and leaves its audience to ponder their implications. (p. 149)

Both cloud Gothic and networked spectrality are conceptual tools for exploring the relationship between digital technologies and fiction. Nevertheless, van Elferen's commitment to interrogating the 'unknowable Real' (p. 148) via Lacan and Žižek, among others, neglects the material conditions that determine the way technologies are produced and used in contemporary Western culture, and thus results in an over-statement of their effects.

The confrontation of the unknowable real is not that augmented reality games indiscernibly blend the virtual and the real, as van Elferen suggests, but that the enabling smart phone was made in a factory in China with working conditions so bleak and austere that workers regularly seek relief by suicide. The real horror is that the material production process has become so abstracted (in part because of the prioritisation of thought economies in scholarship by van Elferen and other postmodern theory devotees) that even when the extremely poor working conditions are reported, many consumers not only eagerly buy the latest models, but pay extra for the gold coloured one. Van Elferen considers fictions exploring

questions about reality in an age when virtuality and reality are seemingly so intermingled as to be effectively be the same. But they are not.

Van Elferen's commitment to deconstruction prioritises the type of thought economy Sconce (2000) critiqued as the 'postmodern occult' (p. 182), whereas networked spectrality is a conscious effort to ground scholastic focus in material, social and political economies. My question is what does a framework more specific than 'technology = Gothic fears of the unknown' look like? What can be learned about ghosts and the theme of haunting from such a frame work? These questions structure the chapters of this thesis and I will revisit them in my conclusion. In combining media and gothic scholarship I argue from a position that recognizes that new technologies are not inherently good or ill, and do not necessarily fit the technophilic/technophobia paradigm in practice, but are surrounded by ambiguity and specific contexts that require careful focus.

### **Dragstrip Hollow's Last Ride: Affordances of Networked Publics and Glitch Gothic Aesthetics**

Sconce returns to the theme of haunted media in his Afterword to Leeder's edited collection (2015). In it, Sconce writes a sort of elegy for the celluloid film reel print of an obscure ghost film called *The Ghost of Dragstrip Hollow* (1959). Mourning the death of the celluloid film medium, its viewing in a cinema, and its dominant position in academic criticism, Sconce articulates the displacement of analogue film and projection by digital means. 'The "death of cinema" ends a long and productive alliance between ghosts and celluloid,' he writes, 'a relationship bound by their shared mutual investment in the analog [*sic*] and the indexical' (Sconce, 2015a, p.

291). In *Haunted Media*, Sconce definitively demonstrates the relationship between spectrality and analogue media, but in the twilight of the cultural dominance of celluloid film, he finds ghosts incompatibly 'allergic' to the digital era (p. 292). In this assertion, Sconce identifies the figure of the ghost as a product of distinctly human, analogue experience. 'As the index of analog [*sic*] beings, a phantom manifesting in the energetic fields that once held the body together,' he argues, 'ghosts resist all efforts to be transformed into binary code and stored on a chip' (p. 292).

Sconce goes on to clarify this position in a footnote claiming,

A number of films have attempted to place ghosts in the digital realm, perhaps most notably Kiyoshi Kurosawa's *Pulse* (2001). While this seems a logical trajectory in terms of 'haunted media,' paranormal theorists have long maintained that the ghost, as a phantom of Being, is a manifestation of various analog spectrums and thus unlikely to survive in a digital environment. (p. 292)

Sconce's indication that Kiyoshi Kurosawa's *Pulse* (2001) is the logical extent of his ideas in *Haunted Media*, solidifies both the original film and the American remake as a popular and scholastic ground zero in the discussion of contemporary depictions of new media hauntings. In his commentary derived from his analysis of both versions of *Pulse*, Kevin J. Wetmore reads the remake as a depiction of post 9/11 American anxieties about the potential dangers of new media technologies. What I identify as the important digital aesthetics of haunting in representations of new media hauntings, Wetmore topically addresses as 'technoghosts'. 'Technoghosts are spirits that display the physical properties of electronic or technical media,' he writes, 'in other words, their physical appearance involves static, appearing blurry, featuring

interference, as if they are being broadcast, rather than haunting, and whose manifestation is both made possible by technology and mediated through it' (2009).

What Wetmore is problematically trying to articulate, and what Sconce stops short of in both *Haunted Media* and his Afterword, is a change from ghosts that manifest in, through and with the aid of analogue 'broadcast' media, to digitally manifesting new media spectres. What networked spectrality helps illuminate, through its specific focus on the historical, material, social and political factors of new media technologies is that when ghosts are coupled with new media technologies, haunting is not merely a singular, personal, temporary occurrence of the supernatural but a systemic threat to, and because of, an increasingly networked and globalised contemporary society. Today's phantoms take on the unbounded, multiple, distributive and participatory qualities of our new media digital networks. Wetmore's analysis lacks sufficient specificity, and Sconce is ultimately uninterested in representations of digital ghosts.

Another article by Sconce, 'The Ghostularity' (2015b), situates the debate about digital haunting in the realm of futurist theory about the projected digital mapping of the human brain. The argument goes that a purely digital 'brain' would not compute the past in terms of imperfect memories, or, to use Hay's phrase 'narrating what has been unnarratable' (2011, p. 4). A digital database cannot experience the past with the human conception of haunting, or any specific human emotion, but rather, operates exclusively in terms of process and information (Sconce, 2015b). For all Sconce has contributed to the understanding of why, historically, media is culturally constructed as haunted, he seems finally to suggest

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that ghosts are a means for the human being to attempt to reconcile themselves with the past, a sentiment incompatible with digital information processing.

Sconce's position in his Afterword is based on an evident nostalgia for the cinematic experience and other technologies being displaced in the digital era, but also on forward-looking projections about closed data environments, environments that necessarily predict ideal scenarios of perfect information. My subject is not whether or how digital databases experience haunting. Such concerns tend to be fictionalized in cyberpunk and science fiction, in fact the interface of the human and a 'ghost' database is the plot of the foundational cyberpunk text *Neuromancer* (Gibson, 1984). Rather, one of the innovations to conceptions of haunting that networked spectrality helps reveal is that even as they are intimately related, contemporary ghosts distort analogue and digital technologies: digital noise indicates imperfect information transfer and announces the presence/absence of ghosts. Distortion is the digital equivalent of the supernatural disrupting the natural setting; supposedly perfect digital information transfer is disrupted by the spectral as errors, glitches, and viruses. Both perfect and corrupted data mirroring, and trends in enduring, searchable and remixable data massively widen the distribution and scale to include any node, anywhere on the entire digital network. The association of these technical themes with ghosts has important ramifications for conceptions of haunting.

In his essay, 'Glitch Gothic', Marc Olivier identifies a glitch aesthetic as one that 'exploits the shock of a digital noise event for the sake of gothic horror' (2015, p. 253). Expounding upon the point, Olivier continues: '[g]hostly apparitions coincide with, and are increasingly incidental to, the presentation of violent disruptions to

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digital media. Visual glitches, or temporary disruptions to the flow of information such as unexpected pixilation, chromatic shifts, and other error-based distortions, now constitute essential tropes in the language of cinematic ghost stories' (p. 253). As essential aesthetic and thematic tropes for contemporary ghost stories, such visual glitch aesthetics are evident in all of the cultural products collected and discussed in this thesis, with an early template for such an aesthetic evident in *Ghost* (1990), allowed to run rampant in *Pulse* (2006), woven into the frame narrative and structure of *Unfriended* (2014), made more demure (but no less digital) in *Black Mirror* ('Be Right Back', 2013), and further complicated by a social context in *Slender Man* and its adoption as the signature aesthetic of Anonymous.

Omnipresent and essential as it is for contemporary depictions of new media hauntings, it is important to note that the predominance of glitches in recent ghost stories is an aesthetic achieved by special effects and is one step removed from the technical, material conditions that cause glitches. 'By definition,' Olivier writes, 'a glitch is an error that gets corrected. The glitch may reach a tipping point, but one where the user still has access to a representation of disrupted of flow [*sic*] through the machine's faithful rendering of corrupt data' (2015, p. 261). This structural function of a glitch depends on humans seeing and comprehending the corrupted digital process, leading scholars and artists to experiment with the relationship between human agency and digital data.

This has led scholar, Allan Cameron (2012), and glitch artists, Hannah Piper Burns and Evan Meaney (2011), to consider glitches as the 'guts' of the digital process. It is an apt metaphor: the guts indicated the 'raw', 'abject' insides of a digital process spilling out into human consciousness. Mediating the unknown to human

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consciousness quickly indicates the spectral: the 'disembodied gut' so vital to the mediation between agency and presence, and ineffectual absence in *Ghost* (see chapter three). As Olivier observes, 'horror precedes the glitch. For a moment the viewer must attend to objects whose nature, codes, and languages are either obfuscated and repressed by design or simply foreign' (2015, p. 262). Like the longstanding traditional binaries that ghosts tend to disrupt, this 'crisis of glitch-born opacity', as Olivier describes it, 'hints at the coexistence of competing representational systems. The glitch opens even the most benign content to an occluded presence that is not spiritual and immaterial, but rather structural' (p. 260). Such structural spectrality is expressed as (glitch) gothic as a 'relentless assault on vision, a clash of digital and biological spectral manifestations' (p. 258). Anonymous incorporates these characteristics of the glitch and its association with the spectral as a prevailing aesthetic in their propaganda videos.

In its current cultural dominance as essential new media haunting trope, it is not the pursuit of genuine structural glitches that signals the presence of the ghost, but the cultivation of a glitch aesthetic. Using special software 'plug-ins, scripts, and after effects', film makers 'take the glitch-alike to one more Platonic degree of remove from a personal encounter with machinic error' (Olivier, 2015, p. 262). Nevertheless, as an aesthetic so closely bound to the digital and the spectral in the cultural imagination, glitch aesthetics adopt the same techniques as traditional ghost stories and strive to 'achieve a degree of verisimilitude that matches the typical viewer's level of visual noise and error literacy' (p. 262). The ascension of the glitch as an aesthetic in new media gothic and beyond, I argue, reinforces the cultural

perception of contemporary data environments as spectral while further obscuring awareness of the material conditions that enable such environments.

Olivier turns to the complexities of digital materiality associated with the emerging methodologies of media archaeology after rejecting the vacuous legacy of 'postmodern occult' ghost scholarship. Olivier finds Baudrillard's characteristic rhetorical role reversal being taken up by Fred Botting (2010) who writes, 'figures of a technological dimension from which human powers and autonomy seem increasingly alienated, video-synthesized and displaced by the machineries of post-modernity' (p. 130, quoted in Olivier). This leads Olivier to observe that scholars theorising the ghost, spectrality and themes of haunting that have championed postmodern, deconstruction, or similar approaches that prioritise the thought economy over the material roam 'through philosophical corridors such as the Žižekian "spectral frame" of virtuality, the Deleuzian void of "ab-sense," and the Lacanian "vacuole" of meaning and nonmeaning, only to end up in a phantasmal fantasy that lies "[i]n and beyond representation and signification" [Botting, 'Candygothic' 2001]' (Olivier, 2015, p. 255). Olivier's critique of theorists that have prioritised the thought economy over the material is a partial model for my critique of van Elferen's (2014) *Cloud Gothic*.

Olivier's commitment to a media archaeology methodology allows him to scrutinize the material implications of the digital process that produces glitches. In such a way, Olivier's work is an important basis for networked spectrality. In his articulation of the glitch gothic aesthetic, Olivier calls the 'jarring spectacle of data ruins' a 'privileged space' in twenty-first century media ecologies, one that blurs spectrality, human psychology, and digital materiality: 'the return of the repressed



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relies not only on human psychology but also on the hidden logic of digital materiality' (p. 253). The persistent, replicable, searchable, and scaleable affordances of network publics that boyd (2010a) observes as the structural affordances of networked publics are a key part of such a hidden logic of digital materiality and social use.

boyd's important work on the structural components of networked publics, and the ways networked technologies serve as an interface between people and information, inform networked spectrality. boyd observes four codependent structural affordances of networked publics:

Persistence: online expressions are automatically recorded and archived.

Replicability: content made out of bits can be duplicated.

Scalability: the potential visibility of content in networked publics is great.

Searchability: content in networked publics can be accessed through search.

(2010a, p. 46)

In 2014 boyd collected many of her findings into a book entitled, *It's Complicated: the Social Lives of Networked Teens*. In the book she made the following slight changes:

Persistence: the durability of online expressions and content;

Visibility: the potential audience who can bear witness;

Spreadability: the ease with which content can be shared; and

Searchability: the ability to find content. (p. 11)

As the core of boyd's findings do not change significantly, and because her initial articulation of the structural affordances of networked publics was formative to my conception of networked spectrality over the course of writing this thesis, I use her

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2010 findings, embellished where appropriate with her latest ideas. It is worth mentioning that in *It's Complicated*, boyd recognises both that these are not the terms teens use and that articulated as such these affordances risk *feeding* paternalistic fears:

To teens, these technologies – and the properties that go with them – are just an obvious part of life in a networked era, whereas for many adults these affordances reveal changes that are deeply disconcerting. As I return to these issues throughout the book, I will juxtapose teens' perspectives alongside adults' anxieties to highlight what has changed and what has stayed the same. (2014, p. 14)

boyd's mention of different navigational approaches to media use between generations is an implicit factor of my networked spectrality reading of *Unfriended* (2014) in chapter two. As aspects of networked spectrality these affordances structure how ghosts take on the nodular, multiple, participatory, and enduring qualities of contemporary digital networks to expresses new depictions of mediated haunting.

While boyd notes that the persistence of information in networked publics 'is ideal for asynchronous conversations', she finds 'it also raises new concerns when it can be consumed outside of its original context' (2010a, p. 47). In fact, such 'new concerns' accompanying networked publics, and the lack of socially defined responses to the newfound overlap between new media technologies and conceptions of haunting, are fictionalised in contemporary gothic narratives as social anxieties. Even without an explicitly gothic framework, it does not take much to conceptualise boyd's affordances of networked publics as spectral contributing

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factors in the figuration of new media as the latest site of haunting, since much of what she is addressing is unseen technical processes that have gradually affected behaviour and use. boyd observes the following central dynamics in networked publics:

*Invisible audiences:* not all audiences are visible when a person is contributing online, nor are they necessarily co-present.

*Collapsed contexts:* the lack of spatial, social, and temporal boundaries makes it difficult to maintain distinct social contexts.

*The blurring of public and private:* without control over context, public and private become meaningless binaries, are scaled in new ways, and are difficult to maintain as distinct. (2010a, p. 49 emphasis in original)

boyd's phrasing lends itself to the terms of networked spectrality: a lack of spatial, social, and temporal boundaries invite the possibility of systemic context collapse where binaries are meaningless and unbound. The persistence and replicability of digital information relates to multiplicity. In networked spectrality there are many ghosts and/or multiple layers of haunting. Scalability and searchability are concerned with scope: networked publics are extensive but prone to context collapse.

The application of context collapse to networked spectrality is rooted in the complexities of mediated social interactionism and is a middle approach between how Marwick and boyd (2011) and digital ethnographer, Michael Wesch (2009), articulate the term. Through their observations of the imagined audiences Twitter users navigate, Marwick and boyd (2011) articulate the impossibility of authentic self-presentation amidst so many possible social contexts. They write:

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Twitter flattens multiple audiences into one – a phenomenon known as ‘context collapse’. The requirements to present a verifiable, singular identity makes it impossible to differ self-presentation strategies, creating tension as diverse groups of people flock to social network sites. (p. 122)

Wesch discusses the phenomenon in relation to the challenges of self-presentation in the moment of recording a video addressed to the YouTube community. Wesch’s definition incorporates a far-reaching focus on personal experience in relation to something much wider and simultaneously ephemeral and semi-permanent:

[On the other side of that web-cam] is everyone who has or will have access to the Internet – billions of potential viewers, and your future self among them [...] The problem is not lack of context. It is context collapse: an infinite number of contexts collapsing upon one another. (2009, pp. 22-23)

Enriching her 2014 articulation of the affordance of searchability, boyd offers another insight on context collapse. ‘Search engines make it easy to surface esoteric interactions’ she writes, ‘[t]hese tools are often designed to eliminate contextual cues, increasing the likelihood that searchers will take what they find out of context’ (p. 120). Context can collapse as a result of information being taken out of context and from an excess of possible contexts.

As a component of networked spectrality, Wesch’s observation of the awkward encounter of a persistent, mediated version of one’s past self in the present draws questions of authenticity into focus and widens the scope of context collapse systemically. What may begin as a personal context can collapse in an enduring, participatory expanse of digital data. Similarly data harvested in wide swaths, a practice known as ‘Big Data’ collection can also represent a type of collapse

as the data is extracted from its original context. In networked spectrality the affordances of networked publics articulate representations of the ghost that are untethered from the personal trappings of tradition to haunt the far-reaching nodes of the network. The shift from a singular, personal ghost to a multiplicity of enduring virtual revenants is a considerable change in the dynamic of traditional conceptions of haunting.

### **Networked Spectrality**

This thesis explores how the digital new media ecology is changing depictions and conceptions of haunting, and the effect such changes are having on expressions of grief, death ritual, and contemporary social life. Sconce is invaluable in establishing the terms of the debate but his reservations about the position of ghosts in digital culture cede that rich scholastic territory to me. It is premature to disregard how the themes of haunting are finding expression in digital media; if anything it is of even more importance to explore the forms haunting is taking as it continues to be expressed as intimately related to digital technologies and processes. This is especially clear in digital film and television production and distribution, which continue to depict the relationship between ghosts and new media technologies as expressions of widespread technophobia. As long as technological determinism is the dominant social view, technology will continue to be portrayed in the cultural imagination as either technophilia or technophobia.

The digital moment has not diminished representations of ghosts and hauntings that continue to appear as the subject of film and television productions, or new types of horror that originate in, and circulate across, a variety of digital

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media, like Slender Man and other horror memes. In fact, Blake and Aldana Reyes (2016) find that constant exposure to digital surveillance, data tracking, and neoliberal political ideologies that valorise digital technologies has solidified a horror of the digital in the increasingly globally networked collective consciousness of film producers and audiences, and that the aesthetics of our technologies are being reflected in our cultural productions in the tone of digital horror.

When I consider the rich contemporary representations of new media hauntings, I want more than social anxiety models and 'hauntings of the surfaces' (Badley, 1995). Networked spectrality is a means for me to address the widest range of new media hauntings, while also allowing me to comment on specific elements of each text, and the interpretations of, and developments to, conceptions and depictions of mediated haunting. I am developing networked spectrality to engage more specifically with the claim that fears surrounding technological advance are written off as generalized fears of the unknown. I am not satisfied that situating new technologies as a site of fear is only about expressing cultural anxiety about new technologies or, at its simplest, reducing fears of technological advance to cautionary tales.

Networked spectrality allows me to expose a conceptual shift in the way we understand hauntings in digital culture, that exceeds the simple replication of earlier models of fear. I view the constant representation of the overlap between ghosts and technology as a source and site of fear as a response to continuing technophilic and technophobic claims about the possibilities of new technologies. I am informed in this stance by Neil Postman who argues that, 'a major new medium changes the structure of discourse; it does so by encouraging certain uses of the intellect, by

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favouring certain definitions of intelligence and wisdom, and by demanding a certain kind of content – in a phrase, by creating new forms of truth-telling (1987, 27). So while ghosts and haunting continue to be paired with advancements in technology as a formulaic quality, digital media technologies are adding several new elements to the concept of haunting, and the conversation surrounding mediated spectrality: the multiple, enduring, participatory qualities of networked spectrality, for example. Networked spectrality is a methodology committed to being historically, materially, socially and politically specific about how the themes of technology and spectrality are represented in contemporary cultural life.

Chapter one begins with *Pulse*, not because it is chronologically first in the range of texts I consider in this thesis, but because it broadly introduces the general themes and digital aesthetic of new media hauntings that I am addressing throughout the rest of the thesis. As a Hollywood set-piece horror film, *Pulse* uses digital special effects to depict the overlap of technology and haunting. The producers sought to update the ‘ghost in the machine’ trope by staking a claim to the rich ‘ghost in the internet’ thematic overlap between new media technologies, spectrality, horror and gore. Thus, the ghosts in *Pulse* colonise contemporary television, mobile phone, Internet and Wi-Fi networks such that they become effectively synonymous with those systems. In its depiction of new media technologies as conduits of digital ghosts, *Pulse* is a deliberately cautionary tale. It reinforces technophobic attitudes toward technological advance and invites readings that focus on the possible social anxieties associated with new media technologies.

*Pulse* plays an important role in the development of networked spectrality because of its highly stylised digital aesthetic of haunting and its depiction of ghosts

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colonising contemporary communications networks, both factors that establish a basis for multiple, nodular, participatory, and enduring new media hauntings. I use *Pulse* to ground networked spectrality's focus on historical and material conditions because the narrative centres on technical structures as the means of spreading the bio-technical apocalyptic contagion. The depiction of nodular ghosts that result from the technical structure of the internet is a foundational trope of new media hauntings, as is the depiction of digital ghosts whose haunting is not a temporary occurrence of the supernatural for a specific end, but a systemic threat to an increasingly networked and globalized contemporary society.

Chapter two addresses depictions of ghosts totally untethered from traditional spectral mechanics. The mainstream digital horror movie *Unfriended* (2015) presents the ghost of Laura Barns as an omnipotent and omnipresent *digital* ghost. As a new media ghost she inverts traditional spectral mechanics according to the structural affordances of new media attention economies: Laura generates and widely circulates information and persists in the digital cloud even after she has reaped her spectral vengeance. Laura has supernatural access to her victim's digital devices and uses that information to haunt across diverse geographical and social networks. The narrative takes place in the found-footage framing device of a Skype call, enabling metatextual and extra-diegetic participation with the narrative, further expanding the scope and scale of the depicted haunting.

Despite the prevalence of the traditional ghost story theme of spectral vengeance, I argue that *Unfriended* furthers the cultural association between spectrality and data in a way that *Pulse* ultimately did not. The key difference is the updated context of the contemporary data cloud that also introduces a focus on Big



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Data. In its portrayal of spectrality unteathered from the site specific, *Unfriended* also depicts Big Data collection and use as spectral, strengthening cultural association between spectrality and data. Such an association not only reflects the persistent, replicable, searchable, and scalable structural affordances of networked publics, but also reflects the social practices and social anxieties that result from these affordances. Thus, my networked spectrality reading considers the social effects of the constant depiction of data as spectral and how spectrality obscures the trading of privacy for access and continued participation on and across the new media attention economies.

Historically, traditional ghost stories depict an intimate domestic setting disrupted by a singular ghost bound by personal and specific conditions that, once met, conclude the haunting. Chapter three considers new media hauntings in personal and domestic settings; in these texts, however, the haunting is not resolved according to traditional spectral mechanics. Because of the persistence of the mediated remains of loved ones, grief becomes a personal context prone to collapse into a persistent, enduring haunting. In this chapter I read Jerry Zucker's *Ghost* (1990) alongside the 'Be Right Back' episode of Charlie Brooker's *Black Mirror* (2013) series, not as an example of a sentimental afterlife of reunion but as depictions of multiple continuums of grief akin to haunting. Both films depict the grief experienced at the loss of a loved one in the framework of a ghost story, and both foreground the importance of mediated subjectivity and identity around, as I argue, the concept of the digital avatar.

The focus on grief in this chapter and its complex navigation around persistent and enduring mediated remains adds a social context to networked

spectrality. Mediation enables the ghosts in these narratives to be both hyperpresent in the lives of their loved ones, but spectrally absent, a tension that ultimately results in the complete confounding of the grieving process. Networked spectrality reads the multiple continuums of grief as imparting a suggestively enduring quality to new media hauntings, a type of haunting that reflects the persistent and replicable affordances of mediation with disastrous effects on the grieving process. In chapter three, I use networked spectrality to unpack the multiple layers of haunting enabled by the affordance of persistent data, and the collapsing of the contexts of grief and mourning.

In chapter four I consider two examples that intentionally stage the depiction of haunting as blurring the on and offline divide. I read the real-world examples of the participatory haunting of the online bogeyman known as The Slender Man, and the notorious activist and hacker collective, Anonymous, as two case studies in how the tropes of new media hauntings are being used for complex social and political ends. Slender Man and Anonymous both use a digital aesthetic of haunting to promote community, radical politics and social challenges to the top-down political and cultural structures. The examples considered in previous chapters identify social concerns surrounding new media and depict them as the latest site of haunting. Slender Man, however, starts as a wholly fictitious paranormal product of new media known as a horror meme. Horror memes tend to be ghost stories that bring a death, the paranormal, and/or other aspects of spectrality to a multitude of diverse new media channels. The very active sub-cultures that surround horror meme content reflect aspects of networked spectrality and digital culture brought by new media communications in the rhetoric of haunting into lived social reality with occasionally

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dangerous results. Slender Man sparked a new media moral panic when two twelve-year old children attempted murder in his name and to prove his existence.

In contrast, Anonymous specifically cultivates societal fears reflecting aspects of networked spectrality in its online videos as means of instilling fear in its enemies. Through a consideration of networked spectrality, the rhetorical and visual tactics of Anonymous can be read as the intentional cultivation and specific implementation of a digital aesthetic of haunting. The video communications of Anonymous feature glitches and digital distortion producing images reminiscent of cultural depictions of new media hauntings. Slender Man and Anonymous help widen the focus of networked spectrality beyond the filmic and televisual, allowing this thesis to also consider contemporary social and political examples.

The focus of chapter five is 'Television's most popular crime drama', as the promotional materials for *CSI: Cyber* tout (2016). As the latest instalment of the *Crime Scene Investigators* franchise, *Cyber* inherits a highly stylised and formulaic focus on the forensic evidence gathered by capable agents who, through their knowledge, skill and intuition are able to solve the crime over the course of the 50-minute episode. *CSI: Cyber* changes the focus from local crime scenes to cybercrime, widening the scope to anywhere new media technologies reach. In this chapter, I argue that the intended reading of the depiction of the relentless solution of the cybercrimes each week endorses a neoconservative political ideology of assurance wrought by the State's committed use of an expansive and effective theatre of security and surveillance.

Digital media technologies are hyperpresent in *CSI: Cyber*, as they are in the other examples of this thesis, but the programme attempts to actively shut down

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associations with the spectral to prioritise the focus on evidence and police procedure. But where such a material, scientific, and judiciary focus might represent an end point of my emphasis on material, social and political specificity, networked spectrality reveals how the programme is shifting roles once attributed to ghosts to hackers, the State and its agents. In reading the depictions of technology on *CSI: Cyber* through networked spectrality, *Cyber* does not escape the associations with the spectral enforced by the structural affordances that govern those technologies. Thus, a networked spectrality reading undercuts the intended neoconservative political reading and instead reveals the troubling overreaches of an opaque, State controlled technical surveillance and security network.

In this thesis, I develop networked spectrality to better theorise contemporary depictions of new media hauntings. I have grouped the texts considered herein into chapters structured around the material, technical, social and political contexts that enrich the ghosts, themes of haunting and spectrality that remain characteristically bound up in the latest digital technologies. The ghosts in new media haunting cultural products are being depicted as multiple, enduring and untethered from the site specific. The continued presence of mediated remains and the relationship between ghosts and digital avatars can become an experience of multiple continuums of grief akin to haunting. Each of these tropes of new media hauntings strengthens cultural association between spectrality and data. Such a prominent cultural conception of the spectral character of data and its association with contemporary digital networks is changing the characterisation of the ghost: cultural products are increasingly depicting hackers, computer technicians or tech savvy agents of the State in the role once ascribed to ghosts. This shift is a key part of

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my argument that new media technologies and their social and technical affordances have begun to change traditional conceptions of haunting and spectrality.

Throughout this thesis, I contrast traditional conceptions of haunting with new media iterations, beginning with the digital ghosts audiences are invited to meet in *Pulse*.

**Chapter One – *Pulse*: Do You Want To Meet A Ghost?**

In this chapter I consider Jim Sonzero's *Pulse* (2006), a remake of Kiyoshi Kurosawa's *Kairo* (2001), as exemplary of contemporary depictions of new media hauntings. The defining visual and tonal characteristics of new media hauntings are a propensity for overt, visceral, digital special effects, and an obvious attempt to emulate the aesthetic of the digital technologies that feature in the narratives. Multiple, digital ghosts flicker and glitch in *Pulse* as they colonize the technical structures of the Internet and Wi-Fi technologies, eventually becoming synonymous with 'the system'. Frequent shots of young people using the latest technologies suggest the hyper-presence of technology in contemporary social life, stirring paternalist fears about how youth use technology. The social challenges of cyberbullying, cyberstalking and digital piracy pepper the background of the narrative, indicating a basis for social anxiety readings.

In *Pulse*, the relationship between technology and spectrality is expressed as viral in both the biological and technical sense. It is depicted as an inky black plague *and* a technical computer virus. In Internet parlance, the scope of the haunting 'goes viral' across contemporary distribution networks, while also drawing a parallel to malicious computer use and hacking. Computer viruses are malicious software that cause an array of damage or chaos through the systems and networks they infect. Much like a biological virus, computer viruses replicate and spread according to specific parameters and suitable environments. In *Pulse*, what ultimately amounts to a near techno-spectral apocalypse begins with users clicking a viral video which ominously invites (forces) them to 'meet a ghost'.

There has been a renewed interest in *Pulse* and *Kairo* as scholars situate more recent depictions of new media hauntings in context. Here, I focus specifically on *Pulse* rather than *Kairo* because of the deliberate visual and ideological production choices that make it more distinctly Western, specifically, more American. One effect of making the film more recognizably American is that the subtle themes of technological isolation and lack of personal social connectivity distinctive to the Japanese cultural context become the overt themes of widespread use and a distinct brand of American technological entitlement. Many early twenty-first-century depictions of new media hauntings, including those discussed in this thesis, assume such entitlement as a given, and build the ghost story from that assumption. I begin with *Pulse* not because it is chronologically first in the span of texts I use to discuss networked spectrality, but because it includes the broadest, most evident range of the tropes of new media hauntings. The evident and topical elements of networked spectrality in *Pulse* establish the thematic basis from which subsequent chapters elaborate.

Popularly and scholastically, *Kairo* and *Pulse* are frequently considered early examples of the ghost on the Internet trope. But whereas some scholars like Kevin J. Wetmore (2009) consider *Pulse* an innovation on the long-established ghost in the machine trope, I find the film and the surrounding criticism more conventional than innovative. Many of the multiple, nodular, participatory, and enduring themes that networked spectrality reads as characteristic of new media hauntings are only topically depicted in *Pulse*. Through an analysis of the production design, I consider *Pulse* an effort to capitalise on the new media cultural *zeitgeist* of the early 2000s by staking a franchise claim to the fertile crossroads of new media technologies, themes

of haunting and filmic horror and gore. I contend that affiliates of Dimension production and distribution were trying to replicate the franchise success they achieved with *Scream* (Craven, 1996), by staging the then-new media ecology (answering machines, alarm clocks, and flip-phones date the film) as the backdrop to the combined ghost story, horror film and outbreak narrative of *Pulse*. The two flimsy straight-to-DVD sequels, *Pulse 2: Afterlife* (2008) and *Pulse: 3* (2008), support my claim that *Pulse* depicts a deliberate *aesthetic* of digital haunting, but does not probe the thematic depths such a setting offers. Ultimately, I consider the topical depictions of new media as the latest site of haunting in *Pulse* as resorting to conventional ghost story tropes and traditional spectral mechanics, despite attempting to innovate on the ghost in the machine trope. *Pulse* limits the terms of its own reception in its topical depiction of new media technologies as harbingers of the apocalypse.

As the tag line, '[t]here were some frequencies we were never meant to find' indicates, the depiction of technology in *Pulse* is clearly a technophobic, cautionary tale (*Pulse* Taglines, 1990-2017). *Pulse* depicts the failings of technological determinism in a register of horror using new media technologies to further a narrative of technological hubris at least as old as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). In its apocalyptic vision of the effects of technology, *Pulse* deploys horror as a conservative and socially restorative mode. After her 90-minute ordeal with systemic new media ghosts, the heroine Mattie (Kristen Bell) narrates the concluding lines: 'We can never go back. The city's theirs. Our lives are different now. What was meant to connect us to one another, instead connected us to forces that we could have *never* imagined' (*Pulse*, 2006). The lines are narrated over footage of her



approach to a low-tech survival camp, a wireless ‘dead-zone’ reconfigured in the film as the only liveable zone left. The techno-spectral near apocalypse depicted in the film ultimately restores conservative values. ‘The world we knew is gone,’ the narration continues, as the image fades into an apocalyptic vision of a smouldering city, ‘but the will to live never dies. Not for us, and not for them’. A slow zoom-in accompanies Mattie’s concluding narration, eventually settling on the spectral Josh (Jonathan Tucker) – Patient Zero in *Pulse* – who suggestively waits for any victims who have not taken the technophobic message to heart.

A credible setting disrupted by the supernatural is a foundational element of the ghost story form. The inclusion of the latest technologies in a ghost story can act as an identifier of continuity between the fictitious naturalistic setting and the assumed reader’s reality. Readings that make the jump from a credible naturalistic setting to claims about the fiction commenting on supposedly widespread social anxieties, however, risk falling into what Baldick and Mighall (2012, p. 279) call the ‘anxiety model’ approach to gothic fictions. Due in part to an iconic scene featuring a plane crashing into the urban setting, Wetmore (2009) reads *Pulse* in the context of the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Centre. Wetmore’s reading makes a large, problematic, contextual jump from anxieties surrounding new media technologies to anxieties about domestic and global terrorism.

Reading the trio of *Pulse* franchise films according to the anxiety model figures *Pulse* as a deliberate cautionary tale depicting ghosts haunting everyday new media technologies, with apocalyptic consequences. *Pulse 2: Afterlife* explores the subjectivity of the ghost in a family drama about divorce and child custody. *Pulse 3* fictionalizes fears about online sexual predators and the ambiguous, spectral, nature

of online communication. In addition to the topical concern with evident social anxieties, the films in the *Pulse* franchise conclude in conservative, restorative ways and are decidedly cautionary and moralistic. As such they reflect the arguments put forward in Joseph Gixti's *Terrors of Uncertainty* (1989). Stemming from his contention that humans are, whether by nature or nurture, inherently horrible, Gixti argues that the horror film is an acceptable means of channelling the innate beast within, whereby horrors can be viewed and expunged but the resolution of a conservative social order offers a cathartic safety valve. In conservative readings like Gixti's, transgressions such as underage drinking, drug use, and sex are resoundingly punished by the serial slasher, but allowing the film to end with an implied ideal of purity restored – the 'bad' are punished while the good and moral prevail, all the better for having had the horrific 'lesson'.

More nuanced criticism followed Gixti (Tudor, 1989; Carroll, 1990; Tudor, 1997; Clover, 1992) but it is less applicable to *Pulse* because the franchise shuns nuance for the evident, overt, and topical. The conclusion of the original *Pulse* sets the conservative, restorative function of horror as the exclusive mode for the sequels which also ultimately conclude with a renewed sense of togetherness fostered by interpersonal rather than inter-technical relationships. After the near techno-spectral apocalypse in *Pulse*, *Pulse: 3* concludes in the explicit terms of 'God, family, and the soil under our feet' (2008). The framing of *Pulse* as cautionary, technophobic, and conservative in its approach to technology, spectrality, and horror invites far reaching social anxiety readings like Wetmore's, making it an ideal vehicle with which to challenge and provide alternatives to such readings.

Although I am developing networked spectrality as an alternative, broad social anxiety readings tend to be the default scholastic approach to depictions of new media hauntings. One reason why social anxiety readings are especially prevalent is because there is a historic cultural tradition (even before adding the theme of haunting) for advancements in technology to be polarized as either technophobic or technophilic. Additionally, many new media haunting cultural products anticipate cultural anxiety readings and intentionally incorporate social anxieties into the narrative. I consider Wetmore's reading a rehearsal of the same old technology-as-fear-of-the-unknown, technophobic, conservative horror readings that usually surround debates about developing technologies.

*Pulse* includes many aspects that can generally be recognized as new media haunting tropes including depictions of multiple, nodular ghosts, conservative technophobic responses, social anxiety readings, and an explicit focus on new media technologies as integral to the haunting. As such, it is an effective first port of call in my project of adding nuance and specificity to the long tradition of cultural products exploring the complex relationship between the latest media technologies and themes of haunting and spectrality. What are the technical affordances of the systems with which the ghosts in *Pulse* become synonymous? In this chapter, I use networked spectrality to introduce some of the historical, material and technical factors, including end-to-end transmission protocol, the procrastination principle, the trust-your-neighbour approach (Zittrain, 2008), and the so called 'dumb pipe' structure the ghosts in *Pulse* colonize as their 'electronic elsewhere' (Sconce, 2000, p. 9).

My networked spectrality reading of *Pulse* focuses on the nodular characteristics of the multiple digital ghosts, as one means of considering a cultural commentary for the film more nuanced than rampant technophobia and a conservative function of horror. The depiction of nodular ghosts that result from the technical structure of the Internet is an important new media haunting trope that I explore throughout this thesis. Here, the depiction in *Pulse* establishes the conservative, technophobic counterpoint to some of the more radical, creative, and social depictions of similar themes evident in other texts considered in this thesis. I approach *Pulse* as a baseline from which networked spectrality progresses.

### ***Kairo* → *Pulse*: The Visuals and Ideology of a 'Bigger, Scarier' American Version**

A detailed consideration of the production history and design of *Pulse* allows me to analyse and critique the overarching aesthetic of the franchise. From long before principal photography began in Romania and continuing until the straight-to-DVD-sequels hit shelves, very specific production design choices established and structured the aesthetic of the *Pulse* franchise. I read the aesthetics in *Pulse* as affirming a topical association with new media technologies and themes of haunting and filmic horror, and reinforcing the film as a technophobic, cautionary tale. New media technologies are a hyper-focus of the film, helping to establish the credible setting, and enhancing the actors and extras playing ghosts with digital special effects. These will be key themes in my production history and production design analysis which begins with the fact that *Pulse* is a remake of an existing Japanese original, visually and ideologically adapted for American audiences.

*Pulse* was written by renowned horror auteur Wes Craven (*The Last House on the Left* 1972, *A Nightmare on Elm Street* 1984, *Scream* 1996). The screenplay is also credited to Ray Wright (*The Crazies*, 2010) and Kurosawa who wrote and directed the original. Craven was also set to direct but left the project over tensions with the producers, causing Bob Weinstein to temporarily halt production. Weinstein nearly terminated the project over a concern that it was too similar to *The Ring* (Verbinski, 2002), a telling detail because it puts *Pulse* in the context of other early 2000s J-Horror remakes.

Also an American remake, of the Japanese *Ringu* (Nakata, 1998), the popular success of *The Ring* in American markets helped initiate a remake craze<sup>1</sup>. As Wetmore (2009) observes, a film's association with Japan and its status as a remake was understood from a marketing stand point as a quality either to be embraced or distanced from. In the Magnolia Pictures trailer for the *Kairo* US DVD, evidently aimed at a burgeoning American market for the Japanese originals, a ghostly digitally overlaid text informs the viewer: 'before *The Ring*, before *The Grudge* [Shimizu, 2004], terror had a different master, from the Godfather of J-horror Kiyoshi Kurosawa' (*The Original PULSE Movie - On DVD Now*, 2006). Although *Kairo* distinguishes itself from other prominent J-horror titles and American remakes, it addresses a similar audience and relishes in the association with the implied best. Conversely, Wetmore writes of the American slasher film *Hatchet* (Green, 2006) that its promotion boasted no affiliations with Japan as a selling point: '[i]t's not a

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<sup>1</sup> The American version of *The Ring* won 10 film awards from various awards bodies including an MTV Movie Award for best villain (Daveigh Chase). It was nominated for 6 others, mostly related to teen audiences or horror genre awards. During its opening weekend it earned \$15,015,393 (USA) in American box office sales, and as of February 2, 2003 grossed some \$128,579,698 (USA).

remake. It's not a sequel. And it's not based on a Japanese one' (2009). If the term 'J-horror' is used, as by some fans reviewers, and scholars, to indicate the aesthetics of Asian horror cinema more broadly than just Japan, the field of films being remade widens considerably. This likely contributed to the appearance of a remake craze in American markets even though not all the titles originated in Japan.

Part of the narrative of *The Ring* depicts VHS tapes and their point-to-point exchange as a site of haunting. The conditions of release from the spectral, more evident in *Ringu* than *The Ring*, depend on *the means of distribution*: making a copy of the VHS tape, and showing it to another person suggests that the only means of surviving the haunting is to potentially condemn another. This process is an analogue point-to-point distribution method that nevertheless grows exponentially. As the next technological evolution, *Pulse* explores the Internet and other digitally networked devices as the means of distribution *and* haunting.

The context of a J-Horror remake craze is a key component to the visual and ideological tone of the production design of *Pulse*. To remake *Kairo* for an American audience is to make deliberate production design choices, including creating a signature aesthetic, that reconfigures the original into an American cultural framework. The central trope that *Pulse* draws from *Kairo* is the association between ghosts and the Internet. As one reviewer notes, prior American efforts to include the Internet as the prevailing focus largely failed to resonate with viewers:

'[a]s previous computer-themed thrillers like "*The Net*" [Winkler, 1995] and "*Firewall*" [Loncraine, 2006] have shown, it's hard to build suspense through key strokes and letters and numbers on a screen. But the supernatural wi-fi

element of “*Pulse*” allows our attractive young characters to become potential victims anywhere they go.’ (Lemire, 2006)

Before the success of the *The Ring*, few cultural products in American markets met with anything more than cult success in their depictions of the relationship between ghosts and contemporary media technologies. *Feardotcom* (Malone, 2002) is perhaps the most well-known contemporary of *The Ring* to portray the theme of ghosts haunting via the Internet specifically.

Although the plot does revolve around supernatural vengeance achieved over the Internet, I consider *feardotcom*’s mix of hardboiled detective story, serial killer narrative and torture porn aesthetic less illustrative of the themes and digital aesthetics of new media hauntings than *Pulse*. Of note, however, *feardotcom* and *Pulse* both forge a conceptual relationship between the theme of haunting and bio-technical contagion. The victims of the Fear.com website are co-investigated by the New York Police and the US Department of Health, to determine if this is a matter for the Center [*sic*] of Disease Control and Prevention. Despite this similarity, *feardotcom* was produced before the widespread use of social media including YouTube and Facebook began in 2006 making its portrayal of the Internet more one-dimensional than the suggestive networked scope of Internet culture in *Pulse*.

There are important differences between *Kairo* and *Pulse*, many of which can be understood as deliberate production choices for the American version, and many of which enable and continue the aesthetic in the sequels. The plot of Kurosawa’s film is existential, abstract and complex. It follows several unrelated university students as ghosts, transmitting through nascent Internet and web-cam technologies, decimate the population of Tokyo. According to Kurosawa in a *Making*

of *Pulse* featurette for the DVD release, the *kanji* for '*kairo*' can be translated as 'pulse' and 'circuit' (2006). Both terms indicate a technological and biological context: the ghosts drain the life force of the living, but are enabled by the circuit technology humans create. The film is also distinguished by a motif of red utility tape that runs throughout the film. The tape indicates a 'forbidden room' (Kurosawa, 2006) but it is highly ambiguous whether the tape acts as a means of sealing in, and thereby containing the ghosts within a specific space, or if it is a preventative measure to keep the spectral out. The distinctive red tape adds a palpable eerie quality to the film, and nearly always signals an encounter with the spectral.

The differences between the *Kairo* tag line, and that of *Pulse*, introduce some of the ideological tonal changes undertaken by the American version. The subtle emphasis on social relationships suggested by the word 'meet' in the *Kairo* tag line: '*Yûrei ni aitai desu ka?* (Do you want to meet a ghost?)' (*Kairo*, 1990-2017), becomes unmistakably technophobic in *Pulse*: '[t]here are some frequencies we were never meant to find' (*Pulse* Taglines, 1990-2017). Making what is subtle and abstract in *Kairo* overt and explicit in *Pulse* sets the broad tone of the remake. Commenting on the production design in a *Pulse* DVD extra, *Creating the Fear: Making Pulse*, producer Joel Soisson's vision was of a 'bigger, scarier' American version (2006). Under Soisson's production guidance, *Pulse* would be a cut-rate, Hollywood horror set-piece: set the film in middle America (Ohio); simplify the plot; cut costs by filming in Romania and with green screens; enlist a cast of up and coming star power recognizable to the target demographic; and let 'bigger, scarier' and distinctly American themes dominate the aesthetic and ideological tone. When *Pulse* was



green lit again these values remained at the core of the production and carried over to the two *Pulse* sequels Soisson would go on to produce, write, and direct.

*Pulse* marks Jim Sonzero's directorial film debut; his previous experience was in music videos and commercials. The conventions of music videos and commercials tend toward close-up shots, fast cuts, and an obvious, functional message. In an interview about *Pulse*, Sonzero said of his previous directing experience in the commercial world: 'I do a lot of beauty and I do a lot of cars. Those are my two areas' (2006). Fast paced and rapidly cut together scenes of Mattie getting ready for class, or changing her shirt, even shots of Izzy's (Christina Millan) toned midriff – lead their friend, Stone (Rick Gonzalez), to comment: 'Damn, y'all [*sic*] look good' (*Pulse*, 2006). The comment stands more broadly for Sonzero's visual approach and philosophy. Sonzero's penchant for close-ups and in-your-face visuals is also evident in his approach to the scares and the clips of recent suicides that appear in the 'Do you want to meet a ghost' viral feed. The theatrical release was rated PG-13 to court fans of the previous work of stars Kristen Bell (*Veronica Mars* 2004-2007) and Ian Somerhalder (*Smallville* 2004, *Lost* 2004-2010), but the unrated DVD depicts the acts of self-harm and suicide in far more graphic detail, including brain matter and blood spray when a man shoots himself in the head, a man violently slashing his wrists and a woman rolling around in a blood-soaked bed. In accordance with stereotypes of Hollywood film techniques, Sonzero's *Pulse* is overt, in-your-face, and more visceral than the subtle, psychological horror often associated with J-horror.

In *Kairo*, Kurosawa favors medium and long shots to convey the bleak and existential mood and the themes of technological isolation and social withdrawal. Kurosawa's choice to shoot many scenes through opaque barriers – panes of glass

and sheets of plastic – add a visual and metaphoric barrier to accessing and relating to the characters, a technique that builds an atmosphere of lingering dread rather than fast-paced edits, jump scares, or body horror for its own sake. Among the most evident tonal differences between *Kairo* and *Pulse* is how both films conclude. *Kairo* is bookended with long-shots of a lone ship carrying few survivors, sailing on an empty expanse of ocean (see *Figure 1.1*). *Pulse* concludes with a coming together of survivors who have fled the technology-infested cities for rural wireless ‘dead-zones’ (see *Figure 1.2*). The dead-zone becomes inverted as a haven that shelters the living from the ghosts that manifest through the wireless communications networks. The ending in *Kairo* can be read as an expression of the effects technologies are having on social and cultural relationships in Japan. The ending in *Pulse* shifts the emphasis to a renewed sense of togetherness— a new manifest destiny built on the foundation of American resilience in the face of near apocalypse.



Figure 1.1 Final scene of *Kairo* (*Kairo/Pulse Japanese w/ English Subtitles*, 2013).<sup>2</sup>



Figure 1.2 Final scene of *Pulse* (2006).

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<sup>2</sup> Midway through writing this thesis CD/DVD disk drives were phased out as standard features on laptop computers. As a result, I could not easily take screen shots from my DVD texts and had to begrudgingly turn to YouTube and elsewhere.

Before moving on to discuss the importance of digital special effects to the aesthetic of *Pulse* I want to highlight one more crucial ideological difference between *Kairo* and *Pulse: hikikomori*. Wetmore (2009) identifies the Japanese experience of 'hikikomori' as a main cultural context of *Kairo*. *Hikikomori* is the term coined by psychologist Saito Tamaki (2013), to refer to the acute social withdrawal of young people in post-industrial Japan. *Hikikomori* is related to a range of social factors, with new media technologies and communication systems playing a significant part. Sufferers tend to be middle-class people between the ages of 16-35 fully immersed in a culture of digital electronics, video games, smart phones, and the Internet. Wetmore associates the scenes of young people secluding themselves away from society and communicating with one another via the Internet and wireless technologies in *Kairo* as fictionalizing this social trend to disastrous, apocalyptic proportions.

There are key cultural differences between Japan and the United States of America, including tensions between traditional social hierarchies and secular modern living, and opportunities and expectations for the younger generations in Japan, that make *hikikomori* a more evident context of *Kairo*. Translating the theme of *hikikomori* for an American audience ends up reflecting the role of technology in American social, political, and ideological cultural frameworks. Despite being set in Ohio, *Pulse* was filmed in Romania and many of the scenes retain the feel of the dramatic Eastern bloc architecture and culture. In an ironic twist, much of the set decoration for the film came from a European IKEA, the Swedish furniture retailer. Nevertheless, these elements combine into the signature aesthetic of *Pulse*. In its depiction of an especially Western sense of technological entitlement, and the

American cinematic penchant for close-up shots suggesting the prioritization of a physiological attachment to the characters rather than broader themes, *Pulse* is distinctly American.

### **The Digital Aesthetics of Haunting in *Pulse***

One of the most noticeable differences between *Kairo* and *Pulse* is Sonzero's wide application of digital filters to the entirety of the film. Kurosawa's naturally and strategically lit scenes become homogenised through Sonzero's intentional colour palette: 'I was going for cool blues, pewters, gunmetal grays [*sic*], and black and white to set the mood' (*Production Notes*, 2006). One effect of the filters is that the entire film has a dark tint. The prevailing visual darkness of *Pulse* is one tactic that makes it more overt than *Kairo*, since it offers more extreme visual and tonal contrasts with the motif of red tape and the flashes of white that come to be associated with the ghosts.

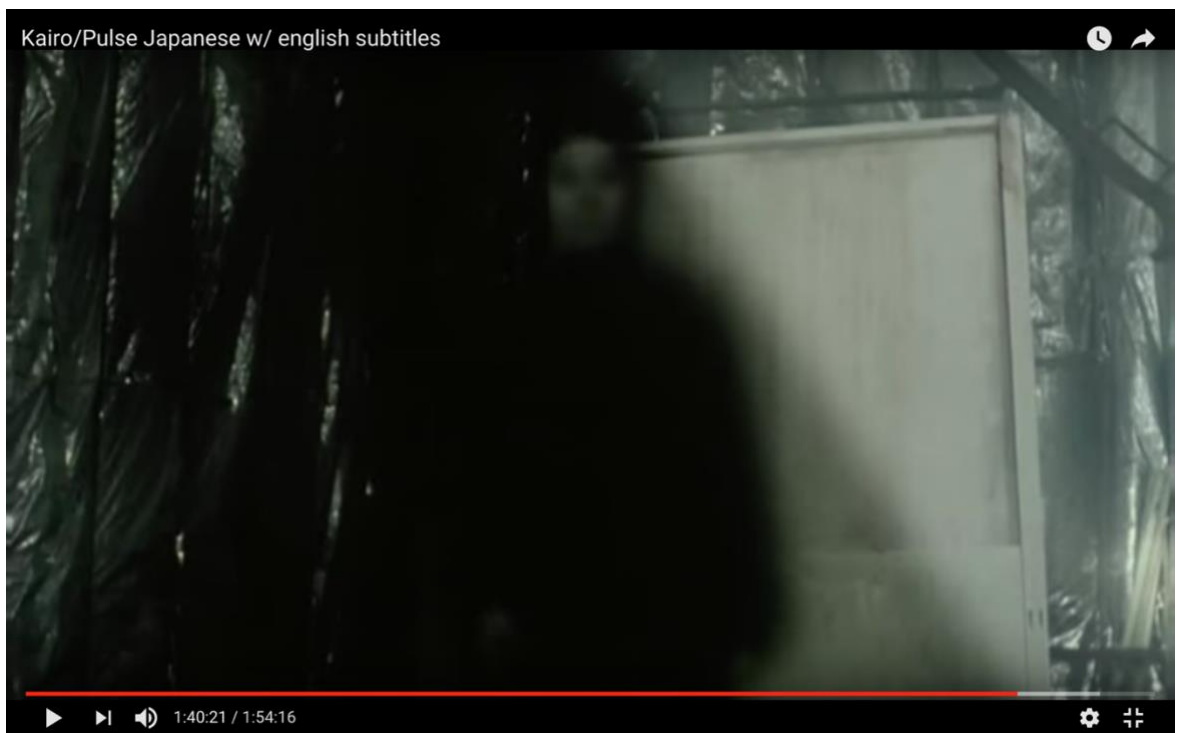


Figure 1.3 Akiko Kitamura's portrayal of spectrality (*Kairo/Pulse Japanese w/ English Subtitles*, 2013).

The portrayal of the ghosts is another key difference and it can be summed up as a matter of aesthetic philosophy: *Kairo* uses minimal special effects whereas *Pulse* extensively uses post-production visual special effects. For example, *Kairo* features a memorable scene of a ghost walking eerily down a hall toward her victim (see Figure 1.3). The scene was performed by internationally renowned dancer and choreographer Akiko Kitamura. It is a striking scene because Kitamura is so convincing in her portrayal of a complexly biological, social and technical metaphoric ghost. She conveys a palpable ethereal quality through her physical movements alone, aided by minimal (or no) post production digital special effects. Kitamura's movements are slow and deliberate but punctuated by sharp jolts. Her gait is uneven and at one point she appears to stumble but springs up suggesting the movement is deliberate. The sudden change of her position reinforces the appearance of

## New Media Hauntings – Chapter One: *Pulse*

unnatural movement but it also mimics the visual effect of a digital glitch or analogue noise event. The scene is genuinely frightening because it is an in-camera, physical stunt but it convincingly mimics glitch aesthetic effects associated with the computers and televisions throughout the rest of the film, including the individuals depicted in the ‘Do you want to meet a ghost?’ feed. In contrast, the wholesale application of post-production digital special effects dominates the entire visual philosophy of the *Pulse* franchise. *Pulse 2* and *Pulse 3* were briefly noted in the film industry for being made so cheaply, shot almost exclusively on green screen sound stages.



*Figure 1.4 Ryosuke (Haruhiko Katô) confronts Death (Kairo/Pulse Japanese w/ English Subtitles, 2013).*



*Figure 1.5 Dexter's (Ian Somerhalder) encounter with a ghost (Pulse, 2006).*

The specific aesthetic philosophy of the *Pulse* franchise is the use of digital special effects to enhance the settings and the actors. This philosophy is most evident when comparing Kurosawa's depiction of the ghostly characters with Sonzero's (see *Figures 1.4 and 1.5*). In a climactic scene in *Kairo*, one of the central characters, Ryosuke (Haruhiko Katô) (the Dexter character in *Pulse*) is confronted by a figure professing to be Death. Initially, Ryosuke renounces Death, showing the strength of his spirit to the end. 'You're not real,' he rationalizes, as he rushes toward the figure and places both hands on his shoulders, surprised to find them solid. 'I am... Real...' the figure responds, marking the moment Ryosuke's will to live falters (*Kairo*, 2001). Where representations of ghosts fall in a range between the material and immaterial is an important factor of the spectral mechanics of any given ghost story. As previously stated in the introduction, Linda Badley (1995) identifies the relationship between special effect technologies and representations of cinematic



ghosts as a defining characteristic of analysis. On the material/informational spectral range, the ghosts in *Kairo* are more material than informational in terms of both the narrative and the production design. Although *Kairo* suggests a multitude of ghosts contributing to the spectral epidemic, the scenes tend to feature a singular, distinctly material ghost. Sonzero takes an opposite approach.

The overriding aesthetic for the ghosts in *Pulse* is digital multiplicity. The multiple and nodular phantoms in *Pulse* are untethered from a specific site to ‘crawl’ entire communication networks. They ‘go viral’ as haunting becomes conflated with systemic, apocalyptic contagion. *Pulse* uses extensive post-production, digital special effects including the black, grey, blue, white and red colour palettes and filters to enhance the scenes of multiple actors and extras playing ghosts. What is singular, material and not or only minimally enhanced with special effects in *Kairo*, is overtly enhanced *as a topical aesthetic* in *Pulse*: multiple, digitally ethereal and enabled by post production special effects.

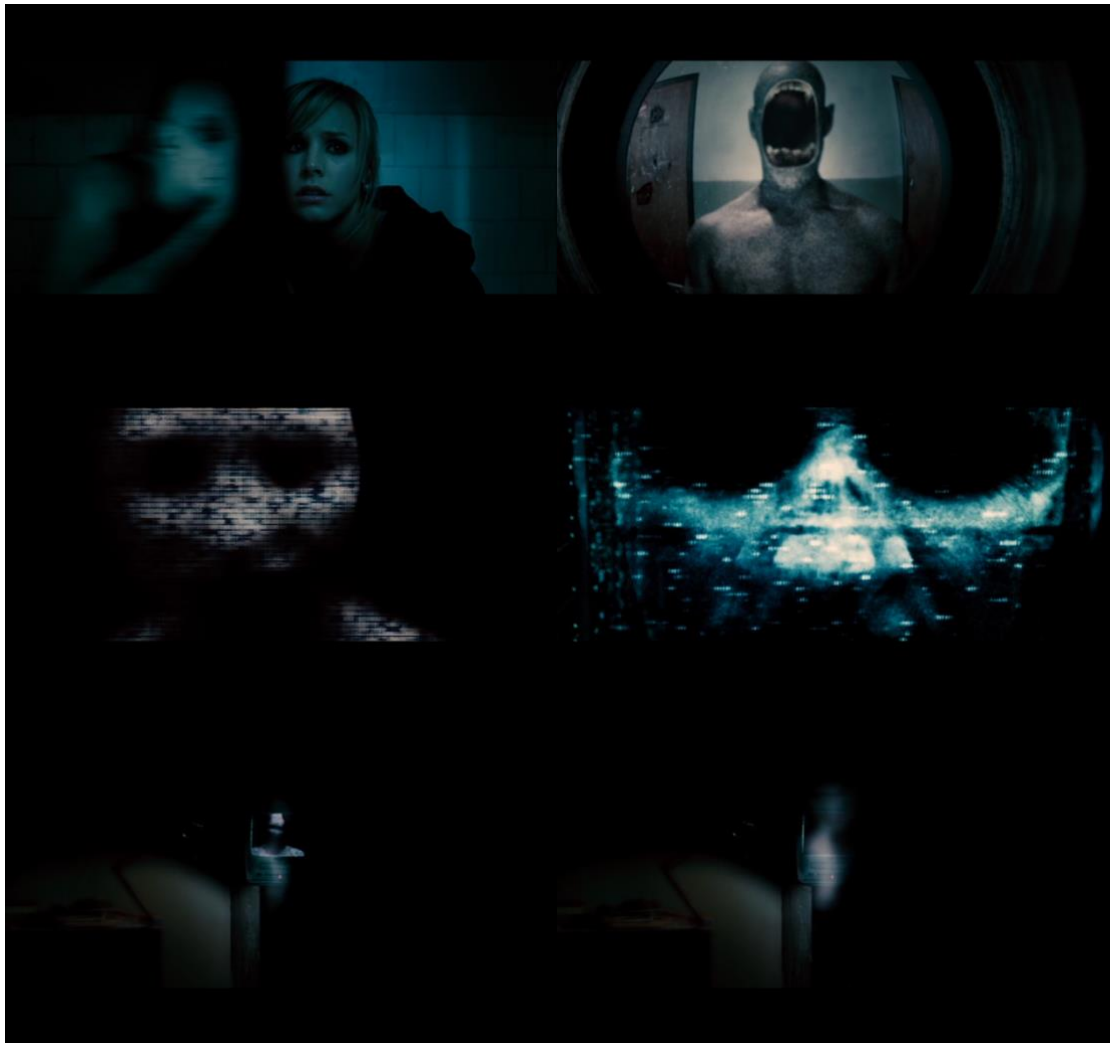
The digital aesthetic of haunting in *Pulse* is achieved by applying layers of digital effects to the footage such that the final image is a composite of the footage and the digital, viewed effectively seamlessly together. As a technique, creating composite or even fully digital images is not specific to the horror or ghost story genres, but horror and ghost stories have adopted, along with science-fiction and apocalypse fiction, the *mechanics* of digital special effects techniques as a core aesthetic that intersects with the narrative and can mirror the use of digital technologies in lived social experience. As I showed in the introduction, Marc Olivier (2015) asserts that a ‘glitch gothic aesthetic’, or the effects predominantly generated by digital technologies, and effects that mimic or appear to mimic how digital

technologies work (or fail to work as is the case of a glitch), ‘now constitute essential tropes in the language of cinematic ghost stories’ (p. 253).

*Pulse* insists on its digital aesthetic of haunting as an obvious, overt, characteristic of the franchise. One reason is because producers wanted a visual way to link the themes of technology, haunting, and biological contagion. Commenting on the portrayal of ‘the ultimate computer virus’ in *Pulse*, producer Michael Leahy (also a producer on *Pulse 2* and *Pulse 3*) addresses the production design choices to achieve an aesthetic that highlighted the technical, biological and spectral relationship: ‘[t]he concept of a virus coming off of any piece of technology posed a visual challenge because not only did it incorporate physical effects that you do on set, but also lighting effects and CGI digital effects. So it was a big bag of mixed elements that brought our ghosts to life’ (*Production Notes*, 2006).

The combination of several techniques, including extensive use of digital special effects, helped establish the prevailing digital aesthetic of haunting in the *Pulse* franchise. The ghosts in *Pulse* are depicted as multiple and nodular in several important ways – all related to an aesthetic that specifically draws attention to the digital layers that enhance the final images. To heighten uncomfortable audience reactions to the ghosts, Soisson explains one of his ‘favorite [*sic*]’ digital effects: ‘the non-effect’. The non-effect is the digital removing of familiar elements: ‘[m]ost of our effects are about taking things away,’ Soisson explains, ‘[w]e’ve been very diligent to remove anything that feels comfortable’ (*Production Notes*, 2006). All the ghosts in *Pulse* are modelled on actors, then digitally enhanced and modified to appear not just Other, but *digitally* Other (see Figure 1.6). While *Pulse* features various ghost characters including women and children, the most frequent depictions are digital

modifications of a tall, muscular, bald male. Sometimes his features are softened and blurred to seem ethereal. Other times the standard facial features are removed or exaggerated, replacing the eyes and nose on the face with just a screaming mouth, for example (see *Figure 1.6*).



*Figure 1.6* Examples of the digital special effects used to depict the ghosts in *Pulse* (2006).

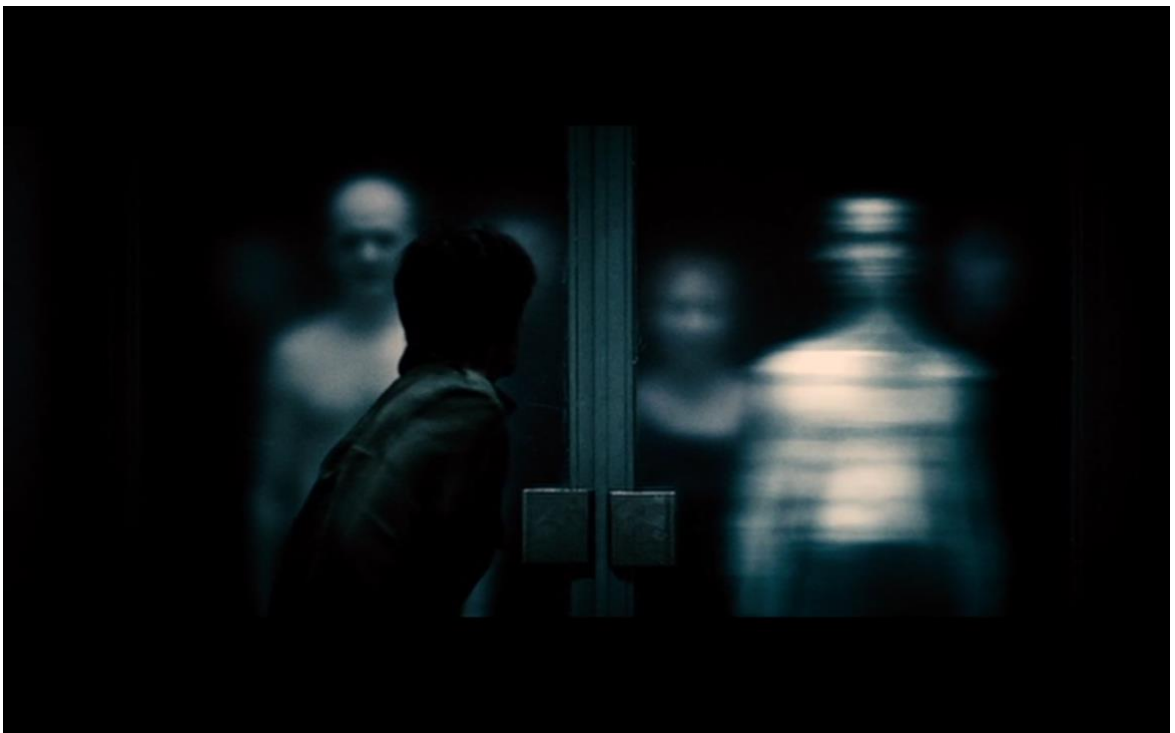
The eyes and noses of the ghosts are most frequently digitally manipulated, but other digital effects include obscuring the arms and legs, adding the effect of pixilation, and digital duplication. Pixilation and digital duplication are both important aesthetic choices that I use networked spectrality to read as also reflecting the larger themes of multiplicity and nodularity. I address the specific technical

conditions and enabling networked structure in a subsequent section, but there are a few more things to say about them in terms of the aesthetics of these themes.

As concepts and an aesthetic, multiplicity and nodularity are important aspects of networked spectrality. The depiction of ghosts as multiple is partially related to the spectral contagion outbreak narrative of *Pulse*, but it is also one of the evident visual differences to *Kairo*. The scale in *Kairo* is equally national and possibly global as in *Pulse* but the cultural context of *hikikomori* reinforces the theme of loneliness and the singular more than togetherness and the multiple. There are a few different ways *Pulse* depicts its multiple ghosts. Some scenes feature many actors and extras playing ghosts (see *Figure 1.7*). This method utilizes minimal digital effects to convey the theme of multiplicity. Ghosts are also depicted as suggestively multiple when as they appear to jump and glitch, and manifest through any piece of technology receiving a signal from the infected 'regional network' (see *Figure 1.8*). This iteration of the theme of multiplicity is enabled by progressively more evident digital special effects.



*Figure 1.7 Many actors suggest the theme of multiplicity (Pulse, 2006).*



*Figure 1.8 The theme of multiplicity is conveyed with digital special effects (Pulse, 2006).*

As a final example of the theme of multiple ghosts in *Pulse*, the film also uses special effects to create images that contain multiple digital layers that act independently of the model and of the other layers. In the most concentrated horde of digital ghosts, Mattie and Dexter encounter what appear to be ghost twins. It is difficult to tell based solely on the scene if the models are twins, or if the figure is a singular boy split into a digital clone. Regardless, these ghosts are enhanced beyond just the 'non-effect' of suggestively missing elements. The twins are among the ultimate specimens of the composite digital layering motif.

The effect of depicting multiple digital layers acting independently is repeated in Mattie and Dexter's final ghostly encounter. This ghost is slightly different to the twin ghosts because it appears, at first, to be a singular ghost. But by using the multiple digital layering technique, the ghost darts and morphs, it appears to have many arms, and is seemingly everywhere at once – smashing in both passenger and driver's side windows to claw at Mattie and Dexter at the same time (see *Figure 1.9*). In terms of special effects, this is the opposite of Kurosawa's reserved aesthetic of haunting in *Kairo* in that the ghost is depicted as *eminently multiple and digital* rather than singular and material. While the aesthetic of the multiply multiple phantom in the concluding scenes of *Pulse* is obviously that of a digital special effect, it represents the end point of another characteristic of ghosts also being developed in *Pulse*: the theme of digital nodularity.



*Figure 1.9 The ghost as representation of the theme of digital nodularity (Pulse, 2006).*

The spectral mechanics of *Pulse* forge an enduring link between the concepts of ghosts and digital avatars. When a digital phantom drains a victim's will to live, their immutable human essence is depicted as a particulate transfer, leaving behind the body as a shell of the former self, which eventually crumbles into ash. The 'soul suck', as it is routinely called in the DVD commentary, is highly indicative of the depiction of an information transfer. There are several prominent visual depictions of the 'soul suck' from various camera angles and vantage points throughout the film, each suggesting the particulate transfer of the victim's vital, immutable human essence.



*Figure 1.10* Mattie's (Kristen Bell) vital essence is depicted as a particulate, digital exchange (*Pulse*, 2006).

In an important scene, Mattie almost has her essence devoured before Dexter rescues her by forcing her to look away and flee. Before Mattie is saved, the digital trace of her screaming soul is evident, not yet consumed, but no longer contained within her body (see *Figure 1.10*). The 'soul suck' is enabled by strikingly similar digital effects as those that surround the aesthetic of the phantoms: a composite of essential particulate information. Much like how the Internet transmits bits, and packages of information, the victims' souls appear as composites of smaller essential aspects of self, being transferred from point to point. One of the defining characteristics of new media hauntings is depictions of ghosts becoming more and more associated with data, and the type of nodular, particulate exchange evident in *Pulse* is an important early indicator of that progression.



Related to infection, and intentionally toeing the line between the biological and the networked technical, the spectral mechanics of *Pulse* depict the Internet as a communications network that allows for nodular, particulate and multidirectional, rather than linear, one-way, spectral visitation. Through its cultivation of an overt digital aesthetic of haunting, one that is deliberately topical, *Pulse* includes new media technologies as a hyper-present focus and tacitly invites social anxiety readings through its surface inclusion of buzzwords – privacy, piracy, malicious hackers and computer viruses. In its depictions of technophobic responses to American technological entitlement, a moralistic, cautionary tale, complemented by a signature aesthetic of haunting, *Pulse* can be understood as using horror in the conservative tradition.

### **Traditional Ghosts in the Machine or Systemic New Media Hauntings**

Josh's suicide by hanging himself with a CAT5 Ethernet cable, and his return as a digital phantom, reinforces the film's joint concerns with technology and spectrality. To this end, *Pulse* depicts a relationship between digital avatar-based new media communication technologies and ghosts. In *Pulse* the usual relationship between user and avatar is reversed. Instead of the avatar representing its pilot as a digital extension of self, the digital phantoms empty the user of their will to live, leaving first a shell of their former self then eventually turning to ash. In a techno-spectral perversion of an 'ashes to ashes' religious metaphor, the depiction is evocative of the particulate transfer of bytes of information. Avatar-based new media communication devices mediate important aspects of self into pixels and bits that outlive the user. I consider the avatar/ghost pairing again in chapter three but In

*Pulse* the relationship is depicted as a progression from a personal, intimate site of grief and mourning, through a networked computer interface, before going viral and threatening outright apocalypse.

Haunting in *Pulse* is depicted as systemic, spreading through all aspects of the digital network. New media technologies are hyper-present in the film from the cacophony of digital communication transmissions that punctuate the opening credits, to frequent, recycled shots of young people indulging in the latest new media technologies. The ‘Do you want to meet a ghost?’ interface is also stylized to look like footage from an Internet streaming site, and Josh’s plot line is delivered through video messages reminiscent of YouTube posts or a video blog. The incorporation of elaborate frame narratives and supposedly real contexts for the footage, introduce the important new media hauntings theme of the blurring of the fictitious and the real, especially evident in found footage horror films and the participatory haunting of Slender Man (see chapter two and chapter four, respectively). *Pulse*, however, makes no narrative or extra-narrative attempt to stage any of the events as real or having really happened. Rather, by depicting new media technologies as an *evident site of horror*, *Pulse* makes a spectacle of important social themes like technological isolation, the spectral nature of avatar-based Internet communication, and real-time or public suicides. *Pulse* offers these themes up as entertainment, and deliberately presents them as horrific or terrifying. But the film also provides a fictional depiction of the theme of haunting transitioning from private, singular ghosts, to profoundly public and near apocalyptic networked spectres.

The conceit of ghosts manifesting through the Internet in *Pulse* can be read as an extension of Sconce’s conception of ‘electronic presence’ and the ‘electronic

elsewhere' (2000, pp. 6-9). The electronic presence of the Internet incorporates all three features Sconce identifies as suggesting spectral electronic 'liveness': profound disembodiment; the 'electronic elsewhere' of the sovereign electronic world; and the anthropomorphizing of media technologies (pp. 8-9). As new media technologies amalgamate the various functionalities of traditionally dominant forms of media, i.e. radio, television, film, etc., into the Internet, the relationship between the material technology and enabling transmission infrastructure and electronic presences is becoming less distinct.

As digital technologies enable users to seamlessly circulate what is simplified in the computing industry as 'data' (often 'Big Data') and in the entertainment industry as 'content', a schism grows between awareness of *how* the technologies work, and *expectations* that they work without fail. Awareness of the material and technical functionality of digital new media technologies has been all but effaced in favour of access (or limited to hard and software 'developers' – a nebulous term seemingly applied to anyone in any facet of the technology industry, as discussed by Keltly, 2005, p. 190). Contemporary users are prepared to trade their privacy, the value of their data, and much more to access and participate in the new media attention economy. Thus, networked spectrality builds on Sconce's foundational concept of the 'electronic elsewhere' while also theorising representations of ghosts in the content and data clouds.

*Pulse* masquerades as an innovative ghost story, replacing the singular and personal spectres of the traditional ghost story with phantoms that are multiple and nodular: untethered from a specific site to, as Douglas Zeiglar (Kel O'Neill), explains, 'crawl' entire communication networks (*Pulse*, 2006). The ghosts in *Pulse* have 'gone

viral’ as haunting becomes conflated with apocalyptic contagion, presenting a possible innovation to traditional spectral mechanics, and the grounds for a networked spectrality reading. Additionally, the scale of haunting in *Pulse* begins as a traditional depiction of haunting, but drastically expands throughout the film.

The first instance of Josh as a ghostly presence after Mattie witnesses his suicide, is when Mattie and her friends collectively mourn in a digital chatroom. This seemingly normative, technologically-aided, social outpouring of grief is interrupted when Josh’s screen name begins spamming the words ‘help me’:

izzieLips: Of course you’re sad, we all are.

STONE\_SOBR: We’ll get through this Mattie.

Tim86: Mattie, you should get out... Want to get some coffee?

JOSH: [Beat] help me.

JOSH: [Beat] help me.

JOSH: help me.

JOSH: help me.

The scene begins by affirming the naturalistic setting: although the subject is grim, the activity of chatting online is common place for Mattie and her friends, but the scene rapidly becomes an uncanny spectral encounter with Josh’s avatar.

The ‘help me’ scene trades on the culturally constructed notions of media haunting through its ‘electronic presence’ (Sconce, 2000, p. 6). The scene also depicts the uncanniness of new media technologies. David Punter provides a simplified list of ten broad aspects of the uncanny:

1. Repetition (including the ‘doublings’ of *déjà vu* and the *Doppelgänger*)
2. coincidence and fate
3. animism
4. anthropomorphism
5. automatism
- 6.

uncertainty about sexual identity 7. fear of being buried alive 8. silence 9. telepathy 10. death. (2005, p. 132)

Punter notes that, such is the nature of the uncanny, many of these categories can be expanded or elided and he even adds several applicable classifications of his own. The new types of uncanny Punter articulates are an uncanny of the virtual locality (p. 134), the uncanny of the continuous present (p. 136), an uncanny awareness of multiplicity (p. 138), a diasporic uncanny (p. 140) and the uncanny notion of celebrity (p. 147). These are useful checklists for this iteration of the ghost in the machine trope, reconfigured in *Pulse* as the ghost in the computer. The scene predominantly features uncanny repetition as Josh's avatar screen name spams the phrase 'help me'. The incessant 'pinging' sound of a new message enforces the theme of repetition. The scene also plays on the possibility of coincidence and fate – that the strange events focus around Josh and Mattie for a reason. The computer is depicted as both anthropomorphized and as an automaton seemingly with knowledge and agency. Josh's phrase 'help me' indicates that perhaps he is still alive, or somehow trapped in the computer. Lastly, the fact that Josh is dead serves to underpin all the previous aspects of the uncanny.

Josh's avatar participates in mourning Josh. Because the audience and the characters all know Josh is dead, when his avatar begins to contribute to the conversation the tone of the scene becomes decidedly paranormal. Yet the phrase 'help me', is suggestive of Josh being somehow trapped in the 'electronic elsewhere' of the computer rather than being dead, experiencing an 'uncanny form of disembodiment, allowing the communicating subject the ability, real or imagined, to leave the body and transport his or her consciousness to a distant destination'

(Sconce, 2000, pp. 8-9). In its contemporary guise in *Pulse*, the stock trope of the 'ghost in the machine' becomes mingled with social concerns about the Internet, including the updated, but nevertheless complex mechanics of avatar-based digital communication.

Avatar representations of self are one means of the digital's integration into lived social experience. Much as Erving Goffman (1971) argued that crucial aspects of the self are constantly being presented in various social situations, as a digital representation of self in online social situations, an avatar is also impregnated with constructed aspects of self. Often a profound, mutually beneficial relationship develops between avatar and pilot. Avatar-based communication functions, in part, because of such a relationship, and because other users grant the same social significance to the avatar as to the user. Without knowing that Josh had died, his friends would have no way of distinguishing Josh's avatar from Josh himself. But Josh is dead, making his continued digital presence an uncanny spectral return in the tradition of the ghost in the machine.

A screen name is a highly ambiguous avatar for presentation of self, lacking crucial physical identifiers of self, yet effectively standing in as the user despite the possibility of anyone being behind the avatar mask at the keyboard. *Pulse* depicts the haunting of computer screens by playing on this spectral characteristic of digital messaging, and incorporating it as part of a signature digital aesthetic of haunting. The depiction of ghosts and digital media technologies as effectively the same in *Pulse* establishes a key characteristic of new media hauntings that I address in this thesis. This is the would-be innovation to the ghost story genre, except *Pulse* falls short of its depiction of ghosts supposedly digitally untethered from traditional

spectral mechanics. Despite the portrayal of ghosts no longer ‘in the machine’ but ghosts that ‘have already crawled the entire regional network’ (*Pulse*, 2006), the spectral mechanics in *Pulse* ultimately revert to more traditional depictions at the film’s conclusion.

*Pulse* attempts to innovate on the ‘ghost in the machine’ trope by depicting haunting as a hybrid biological and digital contagion. When the friends meet in person to discuss the troubling ‘help me’ event, the film draws an important parallel to computer viruses and exponential distribution as Tim (Samm Levine) concludes: ‘It has to be a virus, I mean his computer [is] probably still logged on. It’s just hitting his address book’ (*Pulse*, 2006). The principal visual indicator of this viral iteration of new media haunting is when a computer becomes ‘possessed’ with an uncanny agency and navigates to a screen that forces the user to agree to ‘meet a ghost’. Upon clicking the ‘Do you want to meet a ghost?’ link, the computer displays grainy, webcam quality footage, which becomes an eerie motif throughout the film. At first the webcam footage is of despondent-looking individuals, alone before the camera, but seeming to look through it directly at the user (and audience). The footage cycles through various solitary individuals, many of whom kill themselves in front of the camera.

The images range from disturbing to explicit<sup>3</sup>. The images in the feed do not specifically depict any new media technologies but are reminiscent of early YouTube videos partially enabled by web-camera technologies. A contemporary parallel to this

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<sup>3</sup> The explicit depictions of suicide were edited out of the theatrical version to conform to the stipulations for a PG-13 rating. *Pulse* was released with a BBFC 15 certificate in the UK, retaining the more explicit scenes.

type of new media technology use is live video streaming software and sites like Skype, Twitch, Facebook Live, and Periscope. In *Pulse*, the 'meet a ghost' feed depicts users spending increasing amounts of time in front of a computer or otherwise consuming media. As new media technologies have been embraced in social life, this theme has evolved in contemporary new media haunting cultural products as use to the point of dependency and addiction. In *Pulse*, the 'meet a ghost' feed is depicted as a deeply disturbing, but also strangely hypnotic and alluring encounter with the mediated dead.

The 'Do you want to meet a ghost?' interface is the next step in the progression of networked spectrality, toward haunting as an apocalyptic digital contagion. Where the 'help me' scene is a personal digital encounter with the spectral for Mattie, the 'meet a ghost?' interface is a more general, visual, example of networked spectrality. It poses similar questions about the difficulty in distinguishing lived social experience from the mediated virtual. Here, the visual interface expands upon the more personal avatar interaction but like the impossibility of Josh using his avatar from the dead, how much the interface can be trusted is equally unclear.

When Dexter shows Mattie the feed, he exposes his reluctance to acknowledge the implications of a website that features people killing themselves in real time. He is unwilling to trust that the footage is real, let alone that it might be the ghosts of people that have killed themselves. The reality of such a website is incomprehensible for Dexter as he cannot even give voice to what it might signify. Although Mattie is also inclined to disbelieve the significance of the 'meet a ghost' feed, she has already had a personal encounter with Josh's spectral avatar, which has



problematized her mourning process. She affirms one of the key issues with the relationship between an avatar and the spectral when she expresses her ‘need to move on’. With these continued reminders of Josh she is finding her grief prolonged. Mattie is haunted by both Josh’s absence and the possibility of his spectral digital presence. This type of prolonging of grief, and haunting by presence *and* absence is a crucial factor of new media hauntings.

*Pulse* depicts a nightmare scenario of digital purgatory and the failure of technological determinism: technological advance does not solve societal problems, it traps victims in a grainy, web-cam footage ether instead. In *Pulse* the infected user-victims become trapped in the electronic elsewhere of the ‘Do you want to meet a ghost?’ interface, before eventually becoming a phantom and completing the supernatural circuit. Here technophilia and technologically deterministic fantasies of the expectation that technology will extend life are reconfigured as providing the means for its usurpation. Like many vampire narratives, the desire to live forever is reconfigured as a curse of life taking, and techno-immortality is inverted as a multidirectional digital purgatory and spectral invasion. When Mattie asks how long Dexter has been watching the feed, he replies, ‘No, I think the question is, how long have they been watching me’. This line reinforces the depiction of new media technologies as multidirectional portals to the spectral, expressed through the mechanics of multiple instances of watching (the ghosts, Dexter, the audience) on multiple instances of screens (the web-cam feed, the computer screen, and the screen that interfaces with the audience).

In Dexter’s suggestion that the images have agency, ‘It [the computer] won’t let me [erase the hard drive]’, the scene exemplifies the haunted media trend Sconce

relates to aspects of the disembodied nature of electronic presence. Sconce notes that dissolving into or becoming trapped in the television is a frequently depicted fear, contributing to general cultural constructions of the latest media technologies as haunted. 'Paranormal accounts of simulations and psychosis in television' he observes, 'represent the culmination of the fantasies of electronic presence that began with the telegraph' (2000, p. 197). *Pulse* extends the haunting electronic presence to computers and mobile smartphones, expanding and updating these historic fears to situate them in both the Internet *and* in the devices that provide access. New media digital technologies are thus depicted as multidirectional conduits of and to the supernatural. After Dexter saves Mattie from her 'soul suck' encounter, she begins to comprehend the scope of the spectral contagion: 'They ARE the system' she says. The widening of the scope of haunting is an important theme of new media hauntings, suggesting a networked spectrality reading.

### **Networked Spectrality: Developmental and Technical Network Mechanics**

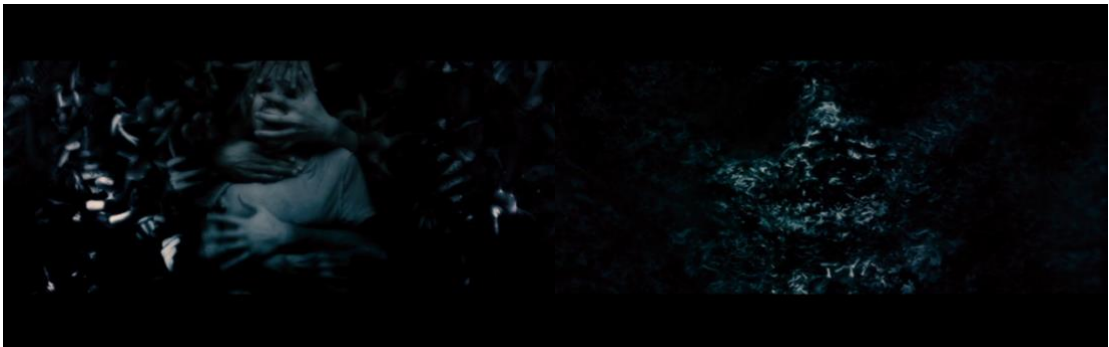
The spectral contagion in *Pulse* is not abstract and immaterial but can be conceptualised in materially specific terms. The Internet as a distributive network has two significant technical aspects: its nodular structure, and the unseen workings of the 'middle' of the network. Although it is not immediately evident or tangible, the Internet has a structure and functions according to specific technical protocols. Numerous people from a wide range of disciplines and backgrounds built the early backbone of the network, working with certain social aims in mind. Jonathan Zittrain simplifies two of these important principles as the 'procrastination principle' and the 'trust-your-neighbor [*sic*] approach' (2008, p. 31).

The procrastination principle was the widely-shared belief of the Internet founders, dating back as early as the 1960s, that if the system initially could be designed simply then potential problems could be solved later. This helped establish the social ideals of openness and trust that surround the Internet. What Zittrain means by trust as an approach is that the Internet was built on the premise that it would be open, that there would be no specific technological restraints on the flow of information. This has led to the Internet being called a ‘dumb pipe’: a system that does not check content and whose sole purpose is to transmit information. In *Pulse* the malicious ghosts take advantage of the openness of the system and enjoy unchecked transmission.

The end-to-end principle is the idea that the information circulating on the Internet can only be manipulated at the end points of the transmission. When an e-mail is sent, the end-to-end principle is in place to ensure that nothing happens to the information while it is bouncing around the various nodes that structure the Internet. This creates a distinct but intangible, technical ‘middle’ of the network that the ghosts in *Pulse* colonize as their definitive electronic elsewhere. When Mattie’s essence is being drained, she witnesses the totality of the spectral network, depicted as a writhing mass of arms, a living landscape comprised of all-consuming ghosts that happen to resemble the phantom attacking her (see *Figure 1.11*). The composition of the spectral landscape from a mass of disembodied spectral arms is suggestive of the nodular, granular transmission of information enabled by the end-to-end principle.

It is more efficient to transfer many uniformly small bits and packets of information along the ‘dumb pipe’ than sending larger amounts of data at a time. The end-to-end principle ensures that all the tiny bits of information can be accessed

from any available sending and receiving node, but are reassembled in the correct order at each end of the transmission. This granular aspect of digital information transfer is a crucial factor that enables the current application (app) based new media technologies, and cloud-based digital services. This trope is evident in many facets in *Pulse* beyond the image of many arms suggesting the composite of a singular ghost. As Mattie's essence is drained it is depicted as a particulate exchange. Drained victims become a 'shell' of their former selves, eventually also dispersing into a particulate cloud of ash. These points contribute to the digital aesthetic of haunting cultivated in *Pulse* including the depictions of the digital phantoms that appear as duplicates and can jump from any technology to any other technology on the network, as if from node to digital node.



*Figure 1.11 An anthropomorphic, living landscape of arms appear to consume Mattie (Kristen Bell) (Pulse, 2006).*

For Sconce the unseen workings and flow of electricity establish the first and all subsequent cultural constructions of haunted media. But as digital technologies increasingly obscure their own material factors, the totality Sconce observes of the scope of the 'electronic elsewhere' encounters an especially relevant caveat. The early development of the Internet was made possible in part by military defence funds, propagating the myth that a founding goal was to create a communications

network that could continue to operate if one strategic node was crippled. A continuing effect of this myth is the belief that the Internet, in its very structure, has become a 'social imaginary' that resists repression (Kelty, 2005, pp. 193-199). This belief has some significant implications on the development of the network and the social attitudes surrounding it. Here it is a potential challenge to the totality of the haunting presence Sconce reads in electricity.

Of course the Internet depends on electricity, but considering the prevalence of the belief in the Internet as resistive, and depictions of the scope of new media hauntings as enduring across the entirety of the digital network, haunting now appears less related to electricity and more related to *information*. As long as part of the network has electricity, the information can still circulate, just as potently as if sections of the network are incapacitated. Cloud-based technologies have obscured the physical geography of information, complicating how, when, and where that information can be accessed, duplicated and transmitted. This technical reality is constructed as a source of systemic horror in *Pulse* through the depiction of haunting as both a biological and technical virus, and through a failed attempt to upload Josh's counter-virus at the point of origin, Zeiglar's server.

The nodular structure of the Internet serves the outbreak narrative of *Pulse*. If the entire network is infected, each node becomes a point of contact with the bio-technical infection. As a node that connects to the Internet network, the computer becomes a multidirectional portal that connects to others, but also allows the spectral to come through. In the cautionary rhetoric of *Pulse* Mattie's concluding narration highlights this link: 'What was meant to connect us to one another, instead connected us to forces we could have never imagined' (*Pulse*, 2006). The concern of

multiplicity is reflected in the presentation of the ghosts: hordes of omnipresent, exponential, digital phantoms. *Pulse* depicts several means of infection, transmission, and haunting beginning with personal, point-to-point contact, then ‘going viral’ through the ‘Do you want to meet a ghost?’ interface, concluding in true apocalyptic fashion as the ghosts have ‘crawled the entire regional network’.

In *Pulse* the depiction of networked spectrality and haunting-as-contagion go hand in hand, in a progressive widening of the scope until finally the ghosts are synonymous with technology and the cities are all but lost. Despite the innovative attempt to depict spectrality as an unstoppable biotechnical contagion in the *Pulse* franchise, promoted by the phrase ‘you can’t stop the infection’ on the back of *Pulse 3* (2008) DVD, it is regrettable, but significant, that the film ultimately reverts to more traditional spectral mechanics. *Pulse* concludes with Josh becoming a digital phantom and inexplicably returning to a room that looks strikingly like that of his apartment, suggesting not an innovation, but the familiar convention of personal ghosts bound to specific conditions and places.



*Figure 1.12 Josh as a digital ghost at the scene of his suicide (Pulse, 2006).*

Previously, seemingly every aspect of the film, from the linked themes of haunting and contagion to the depiction of the ghosts manifesting through ubiquitous wireless communication networks, sought to untether the contemporary ghost from the site-specific, intimate haunting. The scope of the haunting depicted until this concluding scene was suggestively global, indicating a cultural association between concepts of spectrality and data on a macro rather than micro personal level. In her review of Julia Briggs' *Night Visitors* (1977), Gillian Beer argued that '[g]host stories are to do with the insurrection, not the resurrection of the dead' (1979, p. 260). Drawing on Beer, Wetmore (2009) maintains that the insurrectionary ghosts in *Pulse* widen the scope of haunting. But by concluding with the spectral Josh, at the scene of his suicide in his apartment (see *Figure 1.12*), the film can be read according to Briggs's traditional observations – that Josh's spectrality has specific conditions – even if the specific spectral conventions are muddled. Josh is

never depicted in the ‘meet a ghost?’ feed, although the characters Stone and Tim do appear in the grainy motif over the course of the film. Likewise, Josh is never depicted draining any victims. The spectral mechanics in *Pulse* ultimately seem to track Josh’s infection from patient zero, through his purgatorial experience of the ‘meet a ghost feed’, to his transformation into a digital phantom who will drain and infect others in an ever-widening scope. It is unclear who Josh is waiting for – maybe Mattie or perhaps he is meant to be suggestively waiting for the audience as one more unsettling scare before the credits roll and the lights come up. But this is not an especially effective scare in the film, and it is not very conducive to the film’s effort to situate the Internet and the devices that provide access as sites of horror, although it might constitute a wandering attempt at translating the theme of *hikikomori* from *Kairo*.

I argue that concluding the film with the phantom Josh defaults to Briggs’s ‘illogical logic’ (1977, p. 16) which provides the driving spectral mechanics of the sequels that ‘pick[...] up where the original *Pulse* left off’ as summarised on the back of the *Pulse 2: Afterlife* (2008) DVD. But the *Pulse* sequels are stock ghost stories, forgettable, franchise set pieces that do not probe any of the suggestively rich themes that surround the depiction of new media hauntings in *Pulse*. In ending with the phantom Josh waiting in the city, *Pulse* roots the spectral back in the specific rather than allowing it its full, unbound, distributive, networked spectrality. The barely watchable sequels are the result. Although the treatment of the ghosts colonising the Internet trope ends up favouring more traditional, conservative and restorative interpretations of horror, instead of the more expansive, ambiguous aspects of networked spectrality evident in other depictions of new media hauntings,



the *Pulse* franchise establishes a key aesthetic that becomes routinely adopted in later texts.

In *Pulse* the theme of haunting is linked with contagion and new media technology use. The scope of the haunting puts nearly every user at risk. As a plane crashes into the urban setting of *Pulse*, the scope has become systemic, or in the language of networked spectrality, multiple, omnipresent and enduring. The result is a strong appeal to contemporary culture for the normalisation of the Internet and digital new media technologies as haunted, even if other depictions of new media haunting push the networked spectrality themes further than *Pulse*. *Pulse* also depicts many contemporary fears surrounding Internet use and new media technologies as sites of anxiety, leading to critical rehearsals of the social anxiety approach as a baseline to new media hauntings. Beyond the social anxiety approach, the portrayal of the Internet and other new media technologies and devices as multidirectional conduits of the spectral helps solidify a cultural association between ghosts and avatars, and is an important depiction of ghosts that in other new media haunting examples become less associated with the mediating technology and more clearly associated with the immaterial concept of data.

Despite the portrayal of ghosts that 'have crawled the entire regional network' to become effectively synonymous with 'the system', the ghosts in *Pulse* remain evidently associated with material aspects of digital transmission. Eerie cellular towers are a recurring motif throughout the franchise, and as Dexter states just before Mattie discards her mobile phone by the roadside, 'They can't manifest without a signal'. The outbreak narrative of *Pulse* sees Mattie and Dexter journey into the belly of the beast to try to upload Josh's counter virus, contained on a

thumb drive, which Josh took care to tape to the inside of his computer tower, 'offline where they [the digital ghosts] couldn't get to it'. The distinction between the online and the offline reaffirms that the ghosts are related to the technical infrastructure of cellular towers, Wi-Fi hot spots, and radio and television waves. The trope of the ghost as untethered from the visibly material and associated instead with the invisible transmission of data is evident in *Pulse* but not yet the fully digital ghost-in-the-data-cloud as depicted to a degree in 'Be Right Back' (*Black Mirror*, 2013) and as the prevailing motif in *Unfriended* (2014). Additionally, Josh's pride of place at the end of the film, enabling the stock ghost story sequels, reins in the suggestive scope of the haunting in *Pulse* from any technology on the 'regional network' to the more traditional site-bound ghost.

Nuanced in the terms of networked spectrality, the ghosts in *Pulse* are an early, not yet fully recognisable metaphor for ghosts as data – an extension of the ghost as mediation between the material/informational binary that is a central trope of new media hauntings – but one that is now more recognisable, as in *Unfriended* and 'Be Right Back', as a data 'cloud'. From the topical depictions in *Pulse*, new media ghosts can be understood as intimately related to the social affordances of networked publics, in addition to the material and technical. But the early association between ghosts and data in a material and technical context in *Pulse* introduces the multiple, nodular, participatory and enduring, depictions of new media hauntings expressed in more detail in the remainder of this thesis.

**Chapter Two – Digitally Omnipresent and Omnipotent: Spectral Big Data in *Unfriended***

Where I argue *Pulse* (2006) concludes in a more traditional, conservative conception of haunting and where the focus remains tethered to the material communications networks that spread the techno-spectral contagion, *Unfriended* (2015) widens the scope of new media hauntings to address the very public reach of the Internet and other technologies of the twenty-first century mediascape. The new media haunting depicted in *Unfriended* occurs as if in real-time on the familiar streaming video platform, Skype. The haunting unfolds across the geographically and materially abstract databases of 'the cloud'. *Unfriended* is exemplary of new media hauntings: glitch gothic aesthetics (Olivier, 2015) play across the Skype video narrative frame, and the ghost is depicted as untethered from the site specific, now digitally omnipresent and omnipotent according to the affordances of contemporary networked publics.

The ghosts in *Pulse* are described as synonymous with 'the system', and persist despite a counter virus engineered to block their spectral spectrum (2006). Although the ghost in *Unfriended* is a singular spectral antagonist named Laura Barns (Heather Sossaman), she is nevertheless untethered from an identifiable infected server that is allowing transmission through the Wi-Fi. Instead, Laura is associated with the abstract concept of digital information and is bound up in the flows of contemporary data. In this chapter, I deploy a networked spectrality reading of *Unfriended* to argue it is part of a wider cultural shift towards the idea that data – its production, collection and circulation – is spectral in character. As an abstract concept, data is increasingly understood in the cultural imagination as inherently

spectral, an association that suggests a tension between social expectations of use of new media technologies and the preservation of user privacy.

Traditional spectral mechanics would read *Unfriended* as a ghost story about revenge and as examples of the illogical spectral logic of cause and effect that Briggs (1977; 2000) identifies as foundational to the traditional form. But as contemporary ghost stories continue to situate new media technologies as the latest site of haunting, ghosts are being depicted as untethered from the traditional conditions of haunting specific people, places or things. *Unfriended* untethers the ghost from the site-specific by associating it with the incredible persistence of data that can be readily, rapidly, transmitted to and from seemingly anywhere else connected to the cloud. As master and manipulator of digital data, and the network that allows for transmission, Laura becomes multiple, atemporal and seemingly omnipotent in her new media means of affecting the material realm. Laura is so efficient at enacting revenge on her victims, and her mastery of the unseen technical networks is so proficient, an argument can be made that she persists across the data cloud, even after reaping her revenge.

Informed by cultural researcher danah boyd's (2010a) articulation of the persistent, replicable, scalable and searchable affordances of networked publics, I use networked spectrality to help understand the technical affordances of the cloud and explore the range between the formation of new social norms and the possible social anxieties associated with such norms as both are expressed in a spectral register. Networked spectrality allows me to address the haunting implications of such a widespread and culturally accepted association between spectrality and the generation, circulation and preservation of data. In chapter one, I discuss the

technical middle of the Internet and its cultural construction as a haunting 'electronic elsewhere' (Sconce, 2000). By the time we get to *Unfriended*, however, such a technical middle is clearly recognisable as 'the cloud'. *Unfriended* is representative of many recent films that situate the cloud as an ideal medium to depict new media haunting. One key difference between the depiction of new media haunting in *Pulse* and similar themes expressed in *Unfriended* is the way the cloud and the updated technical framework has become a frame narrative linking viewers' expectations of a naturalistic, realistic setting with the latest new media technologies.

The found footage frame of *Unfriended* attempts to stage the haunting narrative of the film as a real event. To this end all the Facebook and Skype accounts of the characters in *Unfriended* remain online in a complex social and legal extra-diegetic grey zone accompanying the film<sup>4</sup>. These and other technical and developmental factors of updating the ghost in the machine trope create fictional representations that mimic technical and social realities. While *Unfriended* clearly engages with social anxieties surrounding cyberbullying, a networked spectality

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<sup>4</sup> For the trademarked Facebook branding to appear in *Unfriended* (or any film) requires permission from Facebook. In *Unfriended* the profiles of the characters serve a narrative function, but the fact that they remain accessible now, is in violation of Facebook's real name policy. Although the policy has been evolving since 2012, and has been relaxed to a degree in 2015, numerous pages still violate the policy and are addressed on a case by case basis. The way Facebook grants permission for use in films has likely changed since *Unfriended* was filmed. In my professional experience working on the film *Burning Bodhi* (2015) I got a first-hand insight into how Facebook permissions work. In *Burning Bodhi* some life-long friends learn of the death of one of the group, Bodhi, via Facebook. I played the uncredited roll of Bodhi and authorised my likeness to the film. A false Facebook page had to be established for the character, and does not remain accessible. The page was a graphic mock up using the visual Facebook elements, and the content I authorised, but was never a live page. This process ensures that when Facebook grants permission to appear in films, the content adheres to the user agreements.

reading focuses instead on the film's representations of the formation and solidification of new social norms around the latest new media technologies *in the register of haunting*.

The continuing development of mobile multi-media devices, capable of transmitting information to and from data clouds at effectively instant speeds, encourages the negotiation of new social norms around the new technical possibilities. When such new social norms are depicted as related to haunting and the spectral, I use networked spectrality to consider the implications for culture and social life. Socio-cultural expectations of access to the high-speed networks and the effects of such access have implications for notions of mobility, distance, time, place, privacy and more. There are certainly social anxiety readings available – *Unfriended* was inspired by the real cyberbullying and suicide of Amanda Todd – but I am using a networked spectrality reading to consider the material and technical as well as social contexts, that surround contemporary cultural attitudes toward the concept of data as it takes on associations with the spectral.

I use networked spectrality instead of a social anxiety reading to consider the cultural and technical tension between Big Data and privacy. It has become a social norm for users to trade privacy for access, but the massive scale and unseen reaches of Big Data are being expressed in cultural products in the register of haunting. I argue that cultural attitudes about the possible breaches of privacy through the digital process of data collection are coloured by representations of data as inherently related to spectrality and haunting; stated plainly in one of *Unfriended's* twenty-seven taglines as: 'Every Photo, Comment, Share, Update, Message, Like, Post can come back to haunt you' (Unfriended Taglines, 1990-2017).

**‘Everyone was posting, so we did too [...] but we’re good people’: Social Anxieties, Social Norms and Networked Spectrality**

Throughout this thesis I use networked spectrality to read new media haunting depictions of ghosts that adhere more to the affordances of digital networks than traditional spectral mechanics. The ghost of Laura Barns is not tethered to the site specific, she haunts the cloud as omniscient, omnipotent and enduring digital ghosts. One goal in my development of networked spectrality is to offer an alternative to critical approaches that do not move past topical social anxiety readings. As an alternative to a focus on cyberbullying, I use networked spectrality to contextualise not only a range of social norms being negotiated around new media technologies, but also as a means to consider the cultural effect of continuing depictions of data as inherently spectral. To highlight the difference of my networked spectrality approach, I begin with the evidence for a social anxiety reading before moving on to my focus on the cultural implications of the association between Big Data and spectrality.

According to many metrics, *Unfriended* was a popular and financial success. Before being displaced by fellow Blumhouse-produced *Get Out* (2017), it had the second highest grossing opening for an original horror film behind *The Conjuring* (2013) and overall netted \$30,985,315 (USD) compared to its \$1,000,000 (USD) production budget (*‘Unfriended’*, 1990-2017). Yet, it met with lukewarm reviews across the board despite many reviewers praising the innovative technical frame and its treatment of the theme of cyberbullying. In an interview as part of *Unfriended’s* showing at the South by Southwest 2015 event, writer Nelson Greaves and director Levan Gabriadze discuss the staging the film from the perspective of a laptop

computer, and address the theme of cyberbullying as hallmarks of the film: 'Two years ago when we started to make the film,' Nelson says,

[cyberbullying] was a big problem. That problem has gotten worse, nobody has the answers, and it is this terrifying thing, you know, that effects where kids live, which is online. (SXSW 2015: "Unfriended" Interview, 2015)

For Gabriadze as director it was important to make the fear associated with the cyberbullying narrative as realistic and relatable as possible. Responding to a question about people's increased emotional connection to what happens online, Gabriadze says, 'The fear comes when it's real. If it's a real desktop, if it's a real program, if it's a real Internet then you just exploit that and play with that and find the story that can be believable' (SXSW 2015: "Unfriended" Interview, 2015).

The resolution of *Unfriended* perpetuates the cycle of cyberbullying, making it the most obvious focus of a social anxiety reading. Both the writing and directing were inspired by the cyberbullying and suicides of Audrie Pott (September 2012) and Amanda Todd (October 2012). There are two scenes in *Unfriended* that suggest these events, which were among several cases widely reported in the news media and discussed across numerous Internet communities including YouTube and Facebook in 2012. The video that circulates about Laura in *Unfriended* ultimately details a moment of extreme embarrassment, but clips throughout the film depict the looming threat of sexual assault. 15 year-old Audrie Pott was sexually assaulted at a party. The perpetrators circulated photos of the assault online which caused Pott to be bullied. She hanged herself because of the assault and the accompanying bullying (CBS/AP, 2014). Pott's suicide establishes the loose narrative frame of *Unfriended*.



Amanda Todd also committed suicide because of being bullied online. Todd tried to resist the bullying by posting a video of herself explaining her torment on YouTube. She never speaks during the black and white video, but instead relays her story on hand-written note cards. *Unfriended* also features Laura in a similar black and white video, silently telling her story on flashcards. The context is changed however, from Todd's sombre confessions of loneliness and self-harm, to Laura using the technique to be crass and vindictive. Inspired by these real cases, cyberbullying is an important context of *Unfriended*. Indeed, cyberbullying is so central to Greaves' interpretation of the film that he thinks framing the topic in a horror film might lead viewers to consider changing their online behaviour:

I think what is really scary about cyberbullying is, kids aren't doing this to be vicious. Kids aren't doing it, you know, to hurt each other. Kids are doing it because it's funny. 'Cause it's simple. 'Cause I just type a few letters, and if 25 people like it, I feel really good about it. And the power of that, and the terror of that, and, and it being so real and so powerful, I think kids might look at this and come out of the movie being like, "Oh my gosh, you know, this is a really scary thing, and maybe I need to reconsider the way I am using the computer." (SXSW 2015: "Unfriended" Interview, 2015)

Despite Greaves imagining a didactic purpose of the film, the comments of the writer and director do not solidify the meaning of a cultural product. But numerous other reviewers read *Unfriended* as commenting on cyberbullying as a prevailing anxiety of contemporary society and computer use.

In her BuzzFeed Entertainment review, an online publication targeting an overlapping demographic as *Unfriended*, Alison Willmore (2015) understands the film

as not just a representation of cyberbullying but one of the few accurate portrayals. '*Unfriended* may be the most cleverly made silly movie of all time,' she writes, 'but it's actually a dead-on portrayal of cyberbullying'. Expanding the point, Willmore writes,

*'Unfriended* is one of the first movies to take on cyberbullying in the form of anything other than a well-intentioned PSA or as part of an overall ripped-from-the-headlines cautionary tale about Internet use [...]. Which makes it, unexpectedly, also the best at approaching a serious topic that tends to get treated as an abstract epidemic, in the style of an after-school special [...]' (2015)

Willmore's review is telling about *Unfriended*'s availability for a social anxiety reading concluding that, '*Unfriended* makes cyberbullying scary, in several senses, but it also makes it mundane, the kind of thing that could happen to anyone, and that doesn't only fall into stereotypical divides of alpha types and traditional targets' (2015).

Willmore's comments echo Greaves' about how pervasive cyberbullying appears to be. For the teens in *Unfriended*, making, circulating and perpetuating the LAURA BARNES KILL URSELF video was a clear betrayal in the shifting site of what is right and wrong for their friend group. But even as Laura is depicted as being a bully in life, the group of friends is hardly any better. During the 'Never Have I Ever' ('I Have Never' in the Britain) game, the Laura video becomes just another point in the mean and tentative relationship bonds between these friends.

The friends negotiate the shifting metric of what is and is not acceptable for their friendship as a norm of that friendship. The result is that the friends do not need Laura to impose her spectral will to be horrible to each other. At one point,

fully aware of her involvement in producing and circulating the video, Laura's former best friend, Blaire (Shelley Hennig), messages the spectral Laura: 'Everyone was posting / so we did too / but we were just joking / we made a mistake / but we're good people'. Here Blaire is colouring her role in the creation and circulation of the video within the complex vicious norms of her friend group. Although Blaire is trying to minimise her role to save face and to save her life, it helps show the extent of the friend's negotiations of what is unacceptable.

The depiction of the shifting metric of what is socially acceptable and what violates the norm in *Unfriended* is a key point in reading the social anxieties suggested by the film. Like Greaves, Gabriadze, and most reviewers, Producer Jason Blum considers some of the fear factor of *Unfriended* coming from its 'relatable' depiction of cyberbullying. 'I think scary movies work best when they're relatable, and I think one of the scariest things to young people now is bullying,' he responded in an interview. He continues:

Either doing it, being on the other end of it, being caught doing it. What is bullying, what isn't bullying, what's a joke, what's not a joke; all those things. So I think the reason the movie is scary is because it's tackling this issue that's on the front of people's minds. (Blum, 2015)

The social anxiety readings of the theme of cyberbullying in *Unfriended* from the writer, director, producer, and reviewers operate on the assumption that the portrayal is accurate and relatable. Despite Greaves' assertion that kids live online now, the film was parodied and critiqued as being a movie 'made by old people who think they understand teenagers' (*Unfriended – Official Trailer PARODY*, 2015).

Another much levied critique is why did the teens not just quit the call and turn off

the Wi-Fi? Greaves claims that the reason no one takes their chances in quitting the call is because they are addicted to media connectivity (*SXSW 2015: "Unfriended" Interview*, 2015). In the same interview where Blum discusses cyberbullying as a relatable context of the film, he also says that part of what drew him to the film was the privileged perspective of seeing the intimate, addictive happenings on a young woman's laptop:

The reason people love movies is because you get to be a spy, right? You get to be a voyeur. And I think it's so fun. And also, I'm 46 years old, so I have no idea what a 22-year-old or 19-year-old does on a computer. And I just remember watching ... I was, [sic] "Oh, this is what young people do." ...

That's the ultimate movie experience, right? When you get to look into someone else's world that you're not supposed to look into. And kids have this very intimate relationship with technology. The most intimate, right?

Because they put all this personal stuff, their whole life, is there. (Blum, 2015)

The question stands: is there a gap between how the 'old' writer, director, actors (none of whom were high school age when *Unfriended* was made), producer and reviewers think young people use technology and the way they actually use it?

Whether *Unfriended* is an accurate depiction of 'where teens live,' as Greaves believes (*SXSW 2015: "Unfriended" Interview*, 2015), it is an accurate depiction of how data circulates on the web, by design. Data in *Unfriended* functions as it does in lived social experience: it persists, circulates widely and is searchable.

As mentioned, one of my aims for networked spectrality is to provide a more nuanced alternative to social anxiety readings of depictions of new media haunting.

To that end, I do not think a social anxiety reading of *Unfriended* moves much past

the focus on cyberbullying. A networked spectrality approach, however, reads the depiction of the ghost in *Unfriended* as effectively multiple, omnipresent, omnipotent, and enduring. Reading the ghost as untethered from a specific time and place because of the association with digital networks links the themes of haunting and the cloud. Networked spectrality opens up a discussion of the themes of online privacy and allows for the exploration of the trend in new media hauntings that associates data and spectrality.

In relating the theme of haunting and searchability in *Unfriended* the implication is that the haunting endures according to digital affordances rather than traditional spectral mechanics. When information persists because it is replicated and widely distributed it drastically expands the scope and likelihood that the original contexts surrounding that information will collapse, especially the private/public context. It can also be archived and readily searched. The emblematic promotional movie poster (see *Figure 2.1*) for *Unfriended* replicates a search bar and predictive search results. In the mock-up of a familiar search bar like that Google or Bing, the search text 'Laura Bar' returns the predictive search results as a drop-down menu: 'Laura Barns suicide, Laura Barns party photos, Laura Barns passed out video, Laura Barns boyfriend, Laura Barns bullied, Laura Barns possession'. *Unfriended* relates the technical functionality of predictive search through a data base which returns results that progress from the tragic to the spectral.

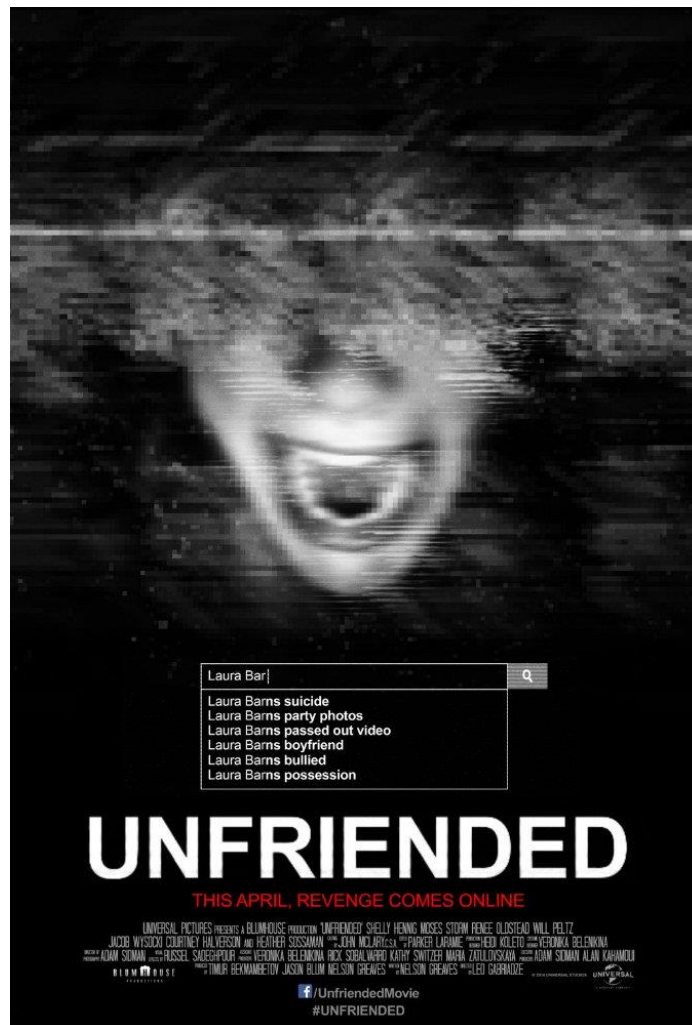


Figure 2.1 The *Unfriended* promotional poster promises a mix of the themes of replication, searchability and glitch aesthetics (*'Unfriended'*, 1990-2017).

In her association with the cloud, Laura transcends the electronic elsewhere (Sconce, 2000) and the material/informational binary. She is digitally omnipresent and omnipotent, and easily expresses her spectral will across a range of digitally networked platforms. She is truly a spectral presence in the film, only depicted as a physical presence briefly as the awkward final jump scare at the end. Throughout the film Laura's thrall, including its relationship with the digital is enough to accomplish her spectral will. In such a way Laura's spectrality mimics the digital proficiency of a hacker, but also makes a direct link to the functionality of Big Data. A networked

spectrality reading engages with what is arguably the most frightening part of *Unfriended*: the association of Big Data as a spectral presence.

## **Found Footage Frames, Glitch Aesthetics and the Shift Toward Networked**

### **Spectrality**

The found footage framing device is related to formal expectations of the ghost story. The Skype call perspective in *Unfriended* strives to depict a credible, relatable, realistic frame for the events of the narrative which also comes to include an encounter with the spectral. Such an elaborate frame narrative is in keeping with trends in the found footage horror form inherited from the widely-revered icons of the genre, *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) and *Paranormal Activity* (2007). *The Blair Witch Project* is considered among the most financially successful independent films to achieve widespread distribution. It was produced for an estimated \$60,000 USD but earned a distribution deal netting \$29,207,381 USD in the US opening weekend ('The Blair Witch Project', 1990-2017). *Paranormal Activity* is considered to have replicated such success, meeting with similar financial returns compared to production costs.

*Unfriended* includes some specific homages to its iconic predecessors, including the hope of achieving similar financial returns on their low production costs. The protagonist's name in *Unfriended* is Blaire, and *Paranormal Activity* writer and director, Oren Peli, receives special thanks in the credits. Jason Blum and Blumhouse Productions were also instrumental in distributing *Paranormal Activity*. The *Paranormal Activity* (2007-2015) franchise is not a focus of this chapter, because the theme of haunting is used to a slightly different end in *Unfriended*. *Paranormal*

*Activity* uses the found footage frame to document an instance of haunting while *Unfriended* situates the found footage on the Internet to stage the haunting as multi-directional and participatory. The new media technologies frame in *Unfriended* also helps establish a credible, readymade context to anchor its excessive use of glitches as visual indicators of encounters with the spectral.

*Unfriended* uses digital special effects to make the footage appear as if it were glitching, what Marc Olivier (2015) discusses as a 'glitch gothic aesthetic' as I explained in the introduction. As the predominant visual technique of recent horror films, the glitch gothic aesthetic pays off double as special effects that are indiscernibly diegetic or non-diegetic. For the characters that witness the glitch events, it is initially easier to rationalise them as technical errors rather than the incursion of the spectral. Glitches both trouble the characters and promise an encounter with the spectral for viewers, a promise that begins when the standard Universal company logo is subjected to audio and visual disruption even before any narrative events of *Unfriended* are shown.

Special effects enabled glitch aesthetics abound in depictions of new media haunting including *Pulse*, *Unfriended* and even *CSI: Cyber* (2015) to a degree. Where the glitches in *Pulse* and *CSI: Cyber* are more obviously the product of special effects or digital layering techniques, their integration into the Skype call frame of *Unfriended* is at first written off as a social reality associated with using contemporary technologies. Glitch aesthetics are a trope in contemporary ghost stories but navigating technical errors, knowledge gaps, and other limitations also constitute the norms of use and digital proficiency with new media technologies. This is most evident when Blaire and her friends are unable to remove an unintended



user from their Skype call, concluding that it must be a 'bug'; a 'glitch'. When the friends quit the call and try again only to find that the unwanted user remains, they write it off and carry on until the unwanted user begins contributing to the conversation.

Although the characters do not yet realise the spectral implications of this 'glitch', things go beyond the irksome nature of a 'normal' glitch as Val (Courtney Halverson) exclaims, 'Well the glitch just typed!'. The 'glitch' is the ghost of Laura and the unsettling implications of the glitch aesthetic suggest the spectral to the viewing audience while acting as a plot point for the friends to work out who the 'glitch' is and what it wants. The technologies on hyper-present display signal the incursion of the spectral on the mediated through an equally hyper-presence of the glitch gothic aesthetic in all facets of *Unfriended*. The glitch gothic aesthetics of *Unfriended* reinforce a cultural association similar to what Sconce articulated as the 'electronic elsewhere' but with the digital cloud as the haunted elsewhere. As a prevailing trope of new media hauntings, cultural attitudes about the cloud are one step further removed from the already abstracted relationship of the electronic elsewhere and the materially specific. *Unfriended* depicts the affordances of the contemporary data cloud in an explicit tonal register of haunting.

The perspective of Blaire's laptop computer camera in *Unfriended*, that establishes the credible context for the near constant glitching, is suggestive of screen capture software (Camtasia), live streaming (Twitch, Facebook Live, Periscope), how-to technical videos (YouTube), and remote access troubleshooting<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Remote access troubleshooting allows a technician to control a user's computer remotely. Providing remote access to functions like the mouse establishes a

It is also the perspective and tone of direct address used in the *CSI: Cyber* (2015) cold open sequence, with the specific intention of fear-mongering. I discuss *CSI: Cyber* in more depth in a chapter five, but the use of the 'lurker in the device' perspective is adopted in *Cyber* to stylistically mimic the digital aesthetics of new media haunting cultural products, like those of *Unfriended*.

The association with glitch, and the general cultural association with glitches as an indicator of the spectral, is one means of depicting the cultural shift away from traditional spectral mechanics to the untethered, multiple, omnipresent and omnipotent spectre of Laura Barns, and from there, as a steadfast trope of new media hauntings. Laura is depicted as an omniscient digital phantom who has access and agency across the cloud and all connected digital devices. This is a crucial point because *Unfriended* depicts Laura as a digital ghost who has unprecedented access to her friends' digital information and is also able to use digital technologies to express her spectral vengeance. In short, in addition to Laura's spectral ability to gain access and circulate information, she is also able to generate digital content. I will return to this point in due course.

As a trope of new media found footage horror films, including a recurring trope in the *Paranormal Activity* franchise, the narratives often provide the

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situation where the computer seems to have a mind of its own (as the technician navigates the user's computer to fix the problem). Everyone I have discussed this method of technical support with has described it as 'creepy'. Visually, and for all practical purposes it is an experience of the ghost in the machine trope and the fact that users have consented to this type of troubleshooting do not minimize its association with the spectral: an unseen user literally controls your computer. While the functionality of remote access troubleshooting is to provide technical support, the same technical process is a common type of malicious computer use known as a Remote Access Trojan or RAT. The entire premise of *CSI: Cyber*, season one revolves around the protagonist's computer being infected with a RAT, discussed in more detail in chapter five.

character's access to information that might help end or explain the spectral encounter. Sometimes this takes the form of a psychic or paranormal investigator (a gesture toward the enduring influence of *Poltergeist*, 1982, on the genre), direct communication through a Ouija Board or séance (*Paranormal Activity*, 2007; *Ouija*, 2014; *Ouija: Origin of Evil*, 2016), or information from the Internet. The sources that have access to spectral knowledge are often depicted as a means of tracking the progression from the rational to the supernatural. They offer an initial point of contact at the fringes of reality and social acceptability that are largely ignored as the film depicts a total abandonment to the supernatural. They also establish the spectral mechanics of the film.

Early in *Unfriended*, Mitch (Moses Storm) fears that the unintended user in their Skype call might be the malign spirit of Laura. Mitch sends Blaire a link to the forum 'unexplainedforums.net' – a sort of how-to guide about dealing with spectral possession – although in true horror genre fashion, Blaire largely ignores the webpage's advice. The characters cannot really credit the advice that would allow them to successfully navigate their spectral encounter because *not* heeding the advice populates the second and final acts of the film with moments of spectral suspense, and allows for the spectacular climax which usually sees the characters die in short order just before the final credits roll. The unexplainedforums.net site contains advice that essentially makes up what I articulate in this thesis as foundational traditional spectral mechanics. It also suggests a relationship between the spectral and the searchable and scalable affordances of data (boyd, 2010a) circulating on networked publics.

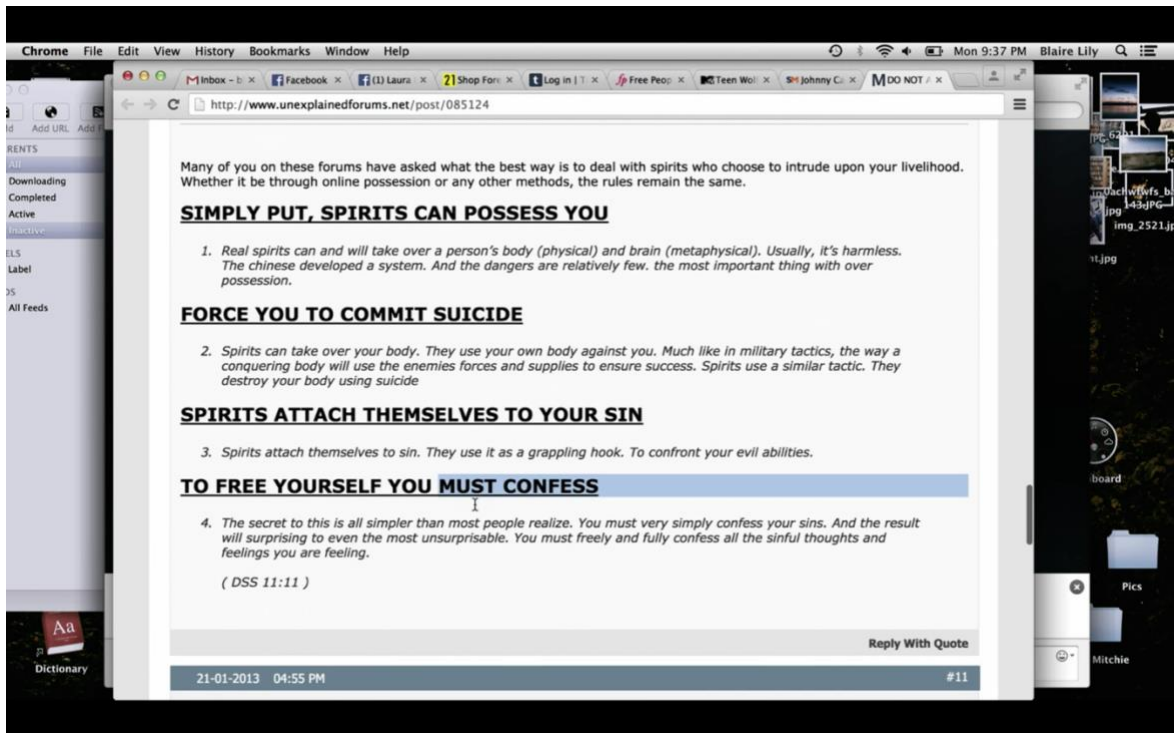
Although it is not possible to read the details of all the posts on unexplainedforums.net when watching *Unfriended* live and without pausing, the most pertinent information appears in bold type face and all capital letters. Savvy viewers will get the gist of the forum page without needing to read everything in detail, reflecting Blaire's practice of skimming web pages for relevant information. In *Unfriended*, the unexplainedforums.net links to the thread heading: 'DO NOT ANSWER MESSAGES FROM THE DEAD...'. The relevant portion of the post reads: '[...] it has been confirmed many times on the forum here that posts from social media accounts of the deceased can be afflicted by possession just as easily as anything else as a method to communicate [sic] between the immaterial spirit realm and our own...'. The thread continues with users relating stories about people that committed suicide after replying. Ghosts that cause their victims to commit suicide are suggestive of the plot of *Pulse*. Suicide is one frequent means of attempting to explain the aftermath of otherwise unbelievable, irrational events of a haunting.

The trope of social media accounts becoming possessed is a clear inspiration for the entirety of *Unfriended* and its inclusion on unexplainedforums.net serves the expository function of letting the audience in on the trope while maintaining the thrill of Blaire and her friends still in spectral danger. It is worth noting that unlike the Facebook pages and Skype user profiles of the characters that remain accessible within those programs, unexplainedforums.net is a fictitious site generated for the film. Some of the responses Blaire scans past apply the rationality test that is so often applied to ghosts as to be considered its own trope: ghosts are not real so what does it matter? Blaire follows the expectation of rational doubt and assumes that Mitch is having a joke at her expense: 'ur not funny' she messages.

Giving no credence to the information on the [unexplainedforums.net](http://unexplainedforums.net) link, Blaire decides that she will report what she instead believes is someone having hacked Laura's account. This is one of many 'rational' explanations for the spectral presence of Laura's digital return from the dead. Another rationale for the unexplained technical problems is that the software is glitching or infected with a computer virus. Evident also in *Pulse* and many other texts considered in this thesis, the association of the spectral and computer hacking or viral infection is a steadfast trope of new media hauntings. Hacking is also related to the affordances of networked publics, but is culturally constructed as malicious computer use rather than the spectral, although that position is being blurred in depictions of new media hauntings. Blaire's rationalising of the events as a hacker recalls the logic Mattie (Kristen Bell) and her friends use in *Pulse* after they experience the first unsettling media presence of Josh (Jonathan Tucker) spamming the phrase 'help me' after his death. As noted in chapter one, the character, Tim (Samm Levine), attempts to rationalise the encounter and put Mattie at ease, saying 'It has to be a virus, I mean his computer [is] probably still logged on. It's just hitting his address book' (*Pulse*, 2006). The spectral prevails in *Pulse* and in *Unfriended* as Blaire is unable to memorialise Laura's Facebook page – with all the required fields of the form being replaced by the significant phrase 'I got her', repeated over and over.

As the unexplained technical mishaps continue and the rational alternatives, like memorialising Laura's account, continue to fail, it becomes clear that the ghost of Laura is the one orchestrating these supernatural events. Blaire eventually returns to the [unexplainedforums.net](http://unexplainedforums.net) page where she scans a 'SPIRITS ATTACH THEMSELVES TO YOUR SIN' post. The post's advice is: 'TO FREE YOURSELF YOU MUST CONFESS'

(see *Figure 2.2*). Blaire mostly just frantically clicks around the page, not taking much of this information in let alone seriously considering it as a means to help her and her friends, but she highlights the text, **MUST CONFESS** and **COMMIT SUICIDE**. These could be read as the means the teens have available to end their spectral encounter with Laura.



*Figure 2.2* Blaire futilely clicks around the *unexplainedforums.net* page (*Unfriended*, 2015).

Confession and haunting are themes that get bound up together in the traditional ghost story. As I stress in the introduction, the conditions that establish the spectral visitation, Briggs (1977; 2000) argues, are part of what establishes the illogical logic of spectral cause and effect – what causes the ghost’s return also generally sets the conditions of release from the haunting. Confessing, accepting the consequences of or making reparations toward the grievance that sets the conditions

for the haunting, *usually* leads to its resolution, according to traditional spectral mechanics. Rarely is the same true in depictions of new media hauntings. Blaire never confesses, even when her guilt in filming the video that caused Laura to be cyberbullied to the point of suicide is perfectly clear, so Laura continues to reap her spectral vengeance on everyone even remotely involved in posting, distributing, and defacing Laura's digital and physical memorials. Laura saves Blaire's comeuppance for the very end, after making her watch all her friends die in horrific ways. Blaire's unwillingness to confess, despite knowing her involvement from the very beginning, is a key factor in the depiction of the haunting as enduring.

The conditions of Laura's haunting are related to the persistence, duplication and circulation of the embarrassing video, conditions that also establish the course of her revenge. It is telling that as an active, spectral presence, Laura refuses to let her Facebook page be memorialised. Laura's resistance to the digital memorialisation process appears as an instance of the spectral *rejecting* technical means of archiving and searchability, but it actually *solidifies* Laura as related more to networked spectral mechanics than traditional spectral mechanics. Laura's command of the searchable space of the digital cloud is reinforced by her association with the affordances of networked publics, not diminished by it. Laura's refusal to be archived widens the scope of her haunting, moving from the site and time-bound haunting of traditional spectral mechanics to the distributive and enduring qualities I use networked spectrality to explore in more depth.

As a trope of found footage horror films that depict new media as the latest site of haunting, the suggestion is that simply bringing traditional spectral mechanics to new media technologies is update and innovation enough on the ghost story

genre, like *Unfriended*'s claim that new media technologies are just another possible point of possession. But in the drive to establish a new media update to traditional depictions of haunting are several themes that end up reflecting the affordances of new media technologies in intended and unintended ways, much more than simply depicting a mediated version of traditional spectral mechanics, as I argue *Pulse* ultimately does. In *Unfriended*, Blaire's refusal to confess, and the enduring digital nature of Laura's revenge are key components to a networked spectrality reading of a type of new media haunting.

***Unfriended*: 'Online, your memories last forever. But so do your mistakes'**

*Unfriended* could be read as a traditional ghost story about revenge. But the way Laura achieves her spectral revenge makes specific, intricate use of new media technologies. *Unfriended* draws an association between spectrality and the persistent, replicable, scalable, and searchable affordances of networked publics (boyd, 2010a). I discuss the centrality of these affordances to networked spectrality in the introduction.

The relationship between the prolific generation and circulation of digital information and the spectral is the prevailing concern of *Unfriended*. The theme dominates the trailer and promotional materials advertising the film, and bookends the narrative as the first and last significant scenes. I use a networked spectrality reading to explore *Unfriended*'s depiction of the persistent and replicable affordances of spectral data circulating on the contemporary digital network of the cloud. Laura's depiction as a digitally omnipotent ghost reaping her vengeance in real

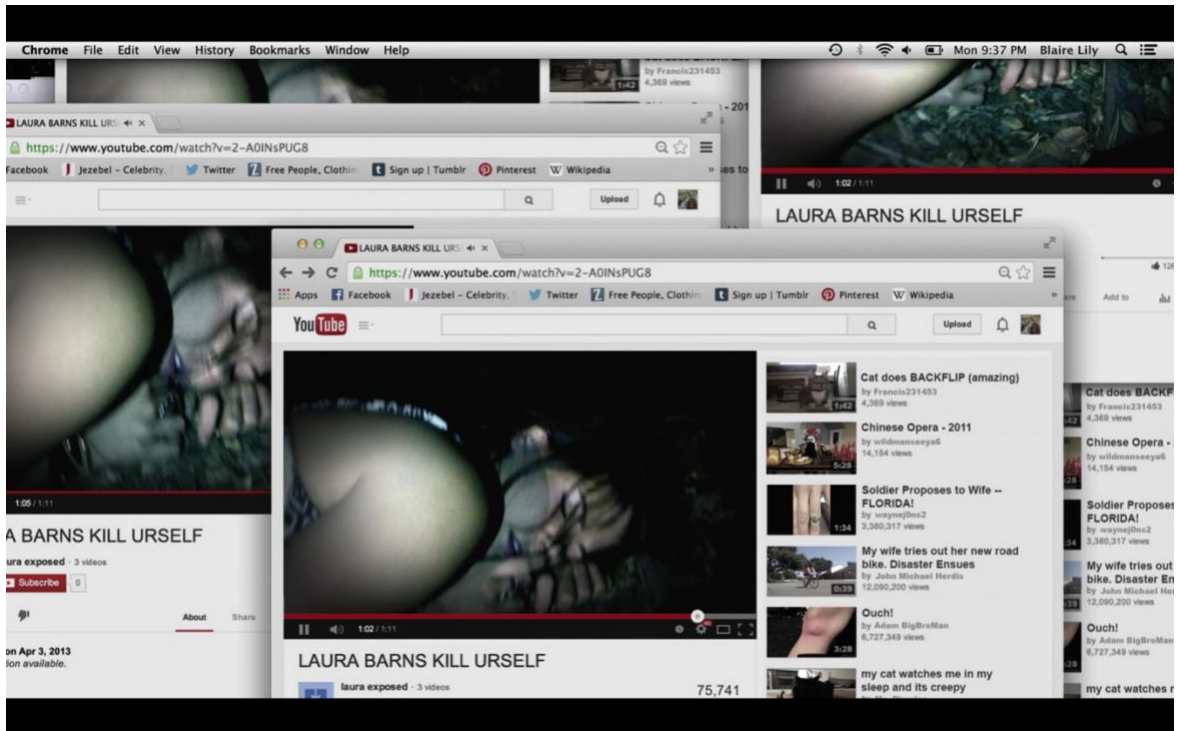


time through the connectivity of the digital cloud suggests the new media haunting themes of multiple, nodular and enduring ghosts.

Laura is a singular ghost but she assails her former digital tormentors by transcending the data cloud to affect the material realm and attack them all at the same time, in each of their homes. The trend in depictions of new media hauntings for the ghost or ghosts to travel across the technical network, like the cloud, to locate, contain and exact vengeance represents a new dynamic to more traditional, site and condition bound conceptions of haunting. Examples of this trope include *In Memoriam [sic]* (2005 [2010]); *Unfriended* clone, *Friend Request* (2016) which was produced for international markets and the latest instalment of the American *Ring* films, *Rings* (2017). The digitally omnipotent ghosts in these films do not adhere to traditional spectral mechanics, but to networked spectrality: they are unbound from the site specific and use their perfect command of the digital information circulating on the cloud to express their spectral will in the material realm. Laura is the perfect storm of digital and spectral power, obtaining her vengeance by subjecting her former friends to a similar digital torment as she received, forcing them to commit suicide under her omnipotent thrall.

*Unfriended* was heavily promoted to teen audiences who could relate to the hyper-present new media frame and content. Many of the actors had minor parts in other film and television projects including the various teen dramas *13 Going on 30* (2004), *The Secret Life of the American Teenager* (2008), and MTV's *Teen Wolf* (2011). The official *Unfriended* trailer premiered on MTV and was promoted across its many branded platforms including MTV.com, MTV's Facebook page, Twitter, Google +, Instagram and even Pinterest. Targeted at young people using technology,

the promotional trailer features happy scenes from graduations, skydiving, weddings, a pregnancy announcement, which lead to text seeming to be typed on screen: 'Online, your memories last forever' ('Unfriended', 1990-2017). The upbeat music and the happy photos and videos become seamlessly interspersed with sexually suggestive images, images of drug use, teens partying (some of this footage makes up the incriminating post of Val that Laura uses Jess's [Renee Olstead] account to post and tag her in), before briefly freezing on Laura's smiling face. The glitch aesthetics begin to take over as a visual announcement of the spectral and the text: 'But so do your mistakes' is typed. The trailer then plays various clips from a YouTube video featuring Laura. She appears flirty: 'wanna take some pictures, you can post it'. She is also being reckless in her alcohol consumption: 'I need another drink'. But ultimately Laura is shown passed out having soiled herself. The trailer depicts a cacophony of digital media use as people message about the video and spread it across all their social networks while the text motif outlines the frame narrative of the video, Laura's suicide, and six friends having a seemingly normal Skype call on the anniversary of her death. Smiling, flirty Laura signs off the trailer after some of the more horrific plot points and deaths are teased: 'This is going to be fun,' she says as the now constantly glitching text types: 'REVENGE COMES ONLINE. COMING SOON' ('Unfriended', 1990-2017). To make the link between the film's premise and social media use unmistakably clear the associated Facebook page, twitter hashtags, and Universal and MTV logos linger for a beat before cutting to black.



*Figure 2.3 The visual cacophony of 'LAURA BARNS KILL URSELF' videos suggests its effect on Laura and how much and how rapidly it was spread online (Unfriended, 2015).*

The trailer depicts the tropes of the ease of content generation – the taking of pictures, videos, posting in real-time to social networks – but also the proliferation of that information across the same networks. The unflattering video that drives Laura to kill herself is shared, embellished upon (with the ruthless text: 'LEAKY LAURA KILL URSELF'), and replicated in a suggestive visual cacophony of the scale the video ultimately reaches (see *Figure 2.3*). With the suggestion that the video is so widely spread comes the reality that it will also be effectively impossible to remove. Information replicated and shared on networked publics has an overwhelming tendency to persist. This technical reality is expressed as the crucial plot device initiating Laura's revenge.

The spectral Laura literalises the technical functionality and the digital (social) practice of unfriending a bothersome contact on social networking sites by killing off Blaire's close friends, one by one. As a ghost, Laura adopts the digital affordances of the cloud to exact her revenge. Although Laura's digital proficiency in life is not a part of the narrative, she has perfect command of new media technologies in death. As a ghost, Laura uses her perfect, spectral digital proficiency to subject her former friends to a similar experience of digital bullying to that which she received. Laura's vengeance includes posting and tagging the teens in embarrassing photos, exposing relationship infidelities and spurring on in-fighting amongst the friends in a fatal game of 'Never Have I Ever'.

In *Unfriended* the unseen technical functioning of new media technologies is routinely depicted as suggestive of the spectral and is at the root of depictions of new media hauntings. Much of the first and second acts demonstrate Laura's spectral mastery and digital omnipresence (across the cloud) – the Skype call is answered as if by itself. Laura can read and respond to messages Blaire has typed but not sent. When the friends contact the police, Laura intervenes. Laura controls Blaire's streaming music playlist including what song is being played and the volume. Laura also posts Blaire's nascent cyber-sex images on a 'Free Live Cams' pornography site. These spectral breaches of the teen's privacy suggest the duplication and persistence of digital information circulating on the cloud. These associations are strengthened by the fact that Laura is depicted almost exclusively as a digital presence: as the Skype user 'billie 227'; through Facebook Messenger (as Laura Barns); as a spectral voice at the other end of a phone call to the police.

As an almost exclusively digital spectral presence, viewers see the effects of Laura's thrall: her ability to affect the material realm in digital terms rather than as a material presence (like Patrick Swayze in *Ghost*, 1990) or through digital special effects as the ghosts are depicted in *Pulse*. At one point Blaire makes light of the complex digital present absence of Laura, laughing off Adam's (Will Peltz) gun waving saying, 'What were you going to do? Shoot through the computer?' Laura's thrall is one of the means *Unfriended* uses to depict the horrific deaths Laura inflicts on her victims while also ensuring a plausible frame narrative and visual spectacle for the viewing audience. Thus, the teens appear to commit suicide but are really under Laura's thrall, a further means of depicting the material effects of the link between the spectral and the digital. Adam does not shoot through the computer in the end, turning the gun on himself under Laura's thrall, instead.



*Figure 2.4* When Laura accesses Blaire (Shelley Hennig) and Adam's (Will Peltz) printers at the same time, it coincides with the glitching of Blaire's web-camera (*Unfriended*, 2015).

In addition to the effects of Laura's thrall, another expression of the relationship between the spectral and the digital is when Laura accesses the printers of both Adam and Blaire at the same time (see *Figure 2.4*). Depicted as the 'bonus round' of the Never Have I Ever game, Laura uses her spectral access to print off messages to Blaire and Adam. The messages, designed to push Mitch's jealousy over the edge, say that if either Blaire or Adam reveal their paper the other one dies. Here, as in many other texts in this thesis (*Pulse*, *CSI*), the printer is depicted as the pinnacle of literalising the material/informational tension of the present absences of the ghost. Overall, new media technologies are depicted in *Unfriended* not as one-way personal devices but as multidirectional public devices that input and output

information across the multiple facets of the digital Internet network and cement Laura's depiction as a digitally omnipotent ghost.

The teens never deny the validity of the digital artefacts from the past that the spectral Laura brings to light in the present. Rather, they bicker about why any of their friend group would post such private or incriminating content. Concerns about behaviours like these led John Palfrey and Urs Gasser to investigate what they call 'Digital Natives' (2008). Palfrey and Gasser's study, *Born Digital: Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives*, was useful in inviting scholarship about the generational differences between the so-called 'digital immigrants' who were exposed to new media technologies later in life, compared to the 'digital natives' who have growing up with digital technologies. But it is hindered by its paternalistic treatment of young people's media use. The term, 'digital native' triggered a windfall of scholarship as researchers tried to sift through the strengths and limitations of a generational analysis of the effects of media use. Currently there is an ongoing debate about whether young people tend to overshare as Emily Nussbaum opines (2007), or if they are more discerning because of their comparative familiarity with online digital networked publics, as boyd (2014) contends. The most compressive article on the evolution of Facebook's privacy policy, and how users respond is Stutzman, Gross and Acquisti (2012).

For the most part, as a digital ghost Laura has unprecedented access to the digital information on the Internet and devices (like the mobile phones which are presumably used to take and post the pictures and videos) and the supernatural means to circulate the information. Laura does not need a password to post content on someone else's Facebook page as that user, and she does not need physical

access or to manually enter the pass code to get beyond a mobile phone's lock screen to extract the sensitive, private content from her former friends' digital devices. It is enough that they are digital devices that provide access and depend on the logic and technical functionality of contemporary digital networks. Laura can expertly navigate the digitally networked new media technologies *and* generate content from her omnipotent spectral perspective.

As a *generative* digital ghost, Laura can seamlessly interface with the digital network *as if she were* a smart phone, a video camera or streaming content. After forcing Jess to suffocate on her own heated hair curling iron, Laura posts the picture as a meme accompanied by the words 'LOOKS LIKE SHE FINALLY STFU [Shut The Fuck Up]' (see *Figure 2.5*). In the film, Jess is alone in her laundry room and bathroom. The image, immediately posted to Jess' account seemingly by Jess herself, has numerous spectral implications including the implausibility of taking/posting a death-selfie, enriching the photo with text to generate a meme, and posting content after one's own death.



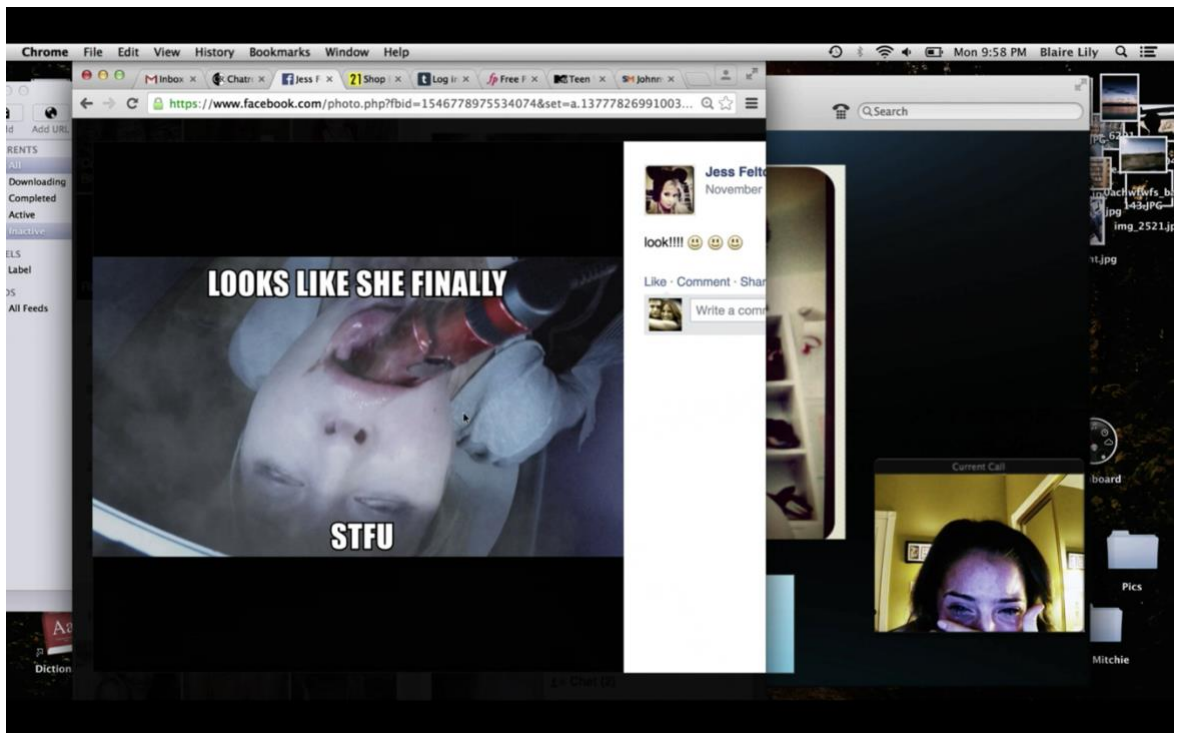


Figure 2.5 The implausibility of Jess (Renee Olstead) posting a death-selfie meme indicates Laura's power as a generative ghost (*Unfriended*, 2015).

In Oliver's discussion of glitch gothic, he notes that one result of the latest pairing of ghosts and technology is that some digital ghosts crave mediation as a means to tell their story (2015, pp. 269-270). The overall narrative of *Unfriended* could be read in this way, but ultimately, I do not consider mediating her story Laura's motive. Rather, she is digitally omnipotent and expertly proficient in navigating the digital network in both content creation and circulation for the express purpose of enacting and *perpetuating* her vengeance. To drive home Laura's spectral digital proficiency, it is contrasted with Blair's innocent digital naiveté.

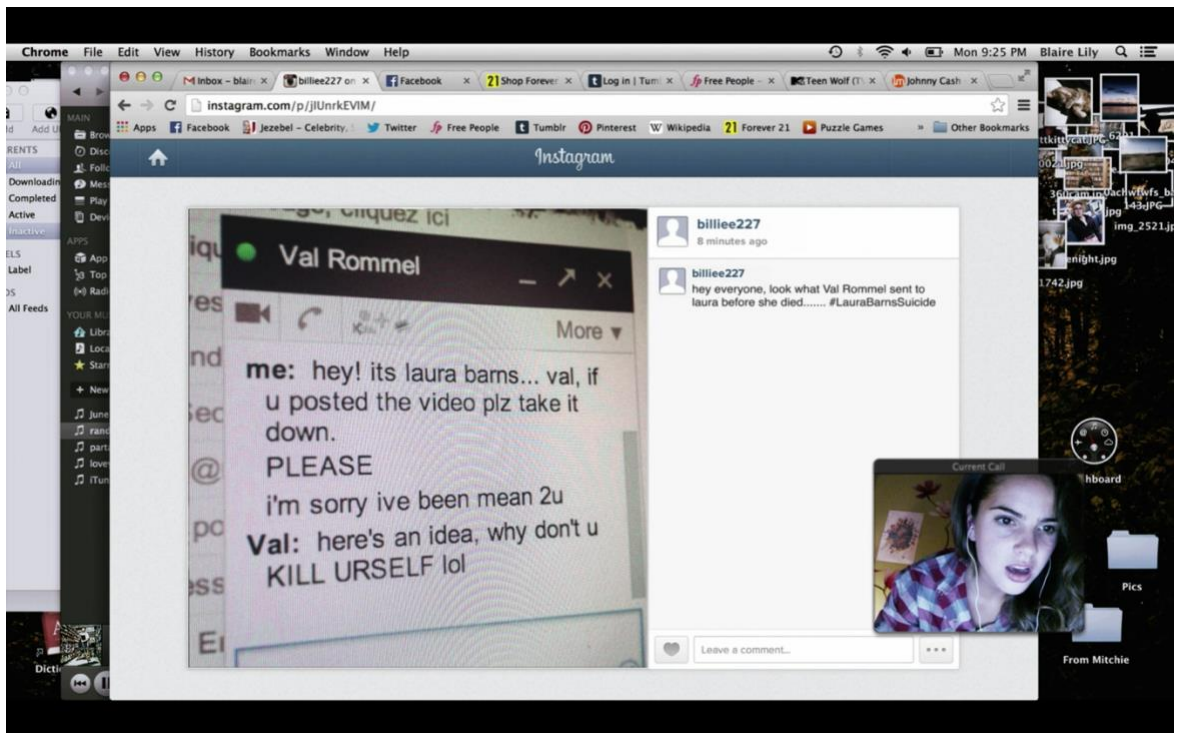


Figure 2.6 Laura posts screen shots of her bullying that took place over a year ago (*Unfriended*, 2015).

The eminently digital nature of Laura's revenge mirrors the role each of her former friends played in producing, editing and distributing the video online. Laura's vengeance, and her resistance to the means the friends use to try and rid themselves of her digital hyper-presence reflects the difficulty of removing widely duplicated, persistent information from the Internet. *Unfriended* is saturated with screen shots of bullying that took place a year ago (see *Figure 2.6*), the suggestive cacophony of the persistent replicated video (see *Figure 2.3*), and posts, tags, messages, memes, and other depictions of new media technologies that become linked to the spectral through Laura.

Each friend on the Skype call had a role in generating and circulating the embarrassing video of Laura suggesting different but linked information nodes.

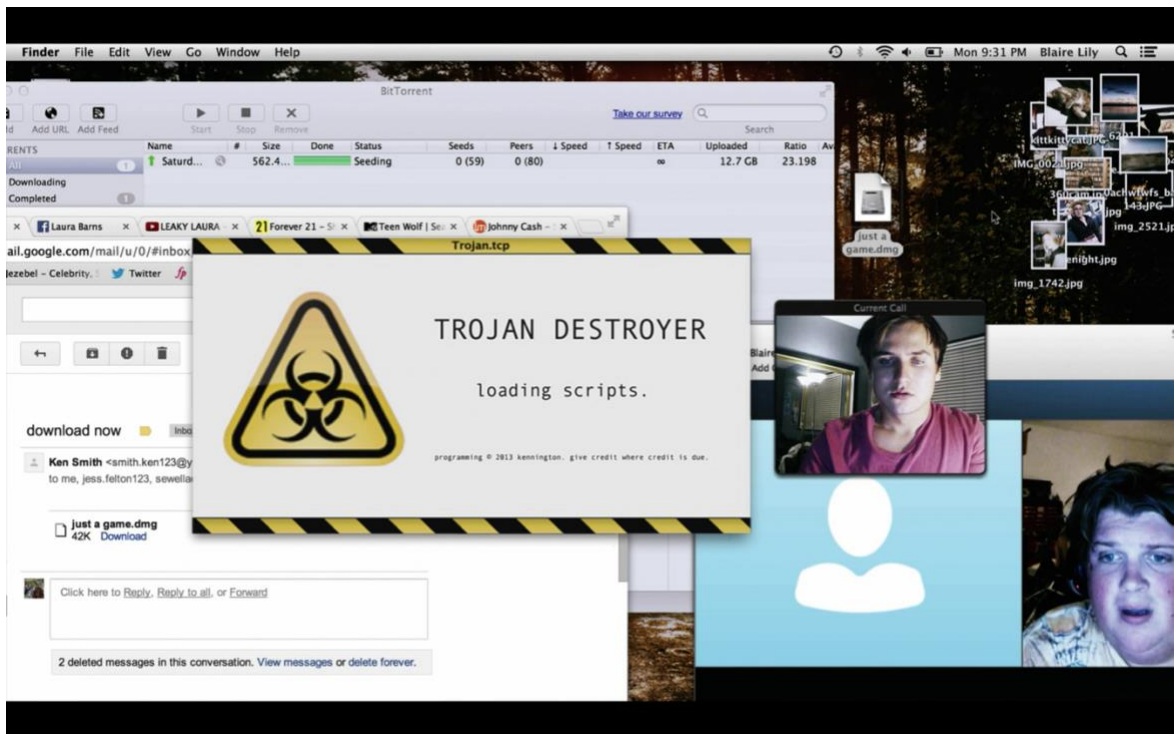
These become the same or similar links and nodes Laura uses for her spectral vengeance. Blaire filmed the video on her smart phone. Mitch was the first to post it anonymously. Jess defaced Laura's grave. Val antagonised Laura about the video (see *Figure 2.6*). Adam dies because Blaire revealed her paper in the fatal game of 'Never Have I Ever', but versions of the script have him drugging Laura's drinks with a laxative to ensure an embarrassing event occurred at the party. Ken (Jacob Wysocki) is the technical mastermind and participated in the anonymous circulation of the video. Networked spectrality relates each of these betrayals of Laura to the persistent and replicable affordances of data circulating in networked publics. These same factors also contribute to Laura's spectral omnipotence and widen the scope of the depiction of new media haunting in *Unfriended* to include the themes of multiplicity, enduring haunting untethered from a time or site bound condition. Following the widening of the scope of haunting in *Unfriended*, I move on to consider the implications of the scalability and searchability affordances of digital data, which also help account not only for Laura's spectral digital omnipotence, but also her depiction as digitally omnipresent.

### **Digital Omnipresence: 'What u've done will live here forever'**

In addition to Laura's depiction as digitally omnipotent, her command of the digisphere also makes her a spectral omni-presence. Laura's digital tormenting of her former friends links the themes of spectrality and haunting with the digital, including realistic, normative new media technology use. Users of contemporary new media technologies share, post, tag, take photos and videos, download, stream music, and have enough digital proficiency to attempt to combat malware and other online

## New Media Hauntings: Chapter Two - *Unfriended*

dangers. Twice in *Unfriended* the teens call the police to report the strange goings on online. These behaviours reflect and adhere to the affordances of networked publics, but because they are also depicted as linked to the spectral, they suggest the multiple, omnipresent, omnipotent depictions of new media ghosts.



*Figure 2.7* The friends attempt to remove the malware they mistakenly believe is allowing the unwanted user to participate in their Skype call (*Unfriended*, 2015).

Despite the normative, digital proficiency the teens demonstrate, no technical means can drop Laura from the Skype call. Blaire is initially unable to unfriend Laura from Facebook – and when she can, Laura restores their friendship status and remains able to communicate with her via Facebook Messenger. At one point the friends even download a program to remove what they mistakenly believe to be malware, to no avail (see *Figure 2.7*). These steps fail because of the intimate association between technology and the spectral cultivated in the film.

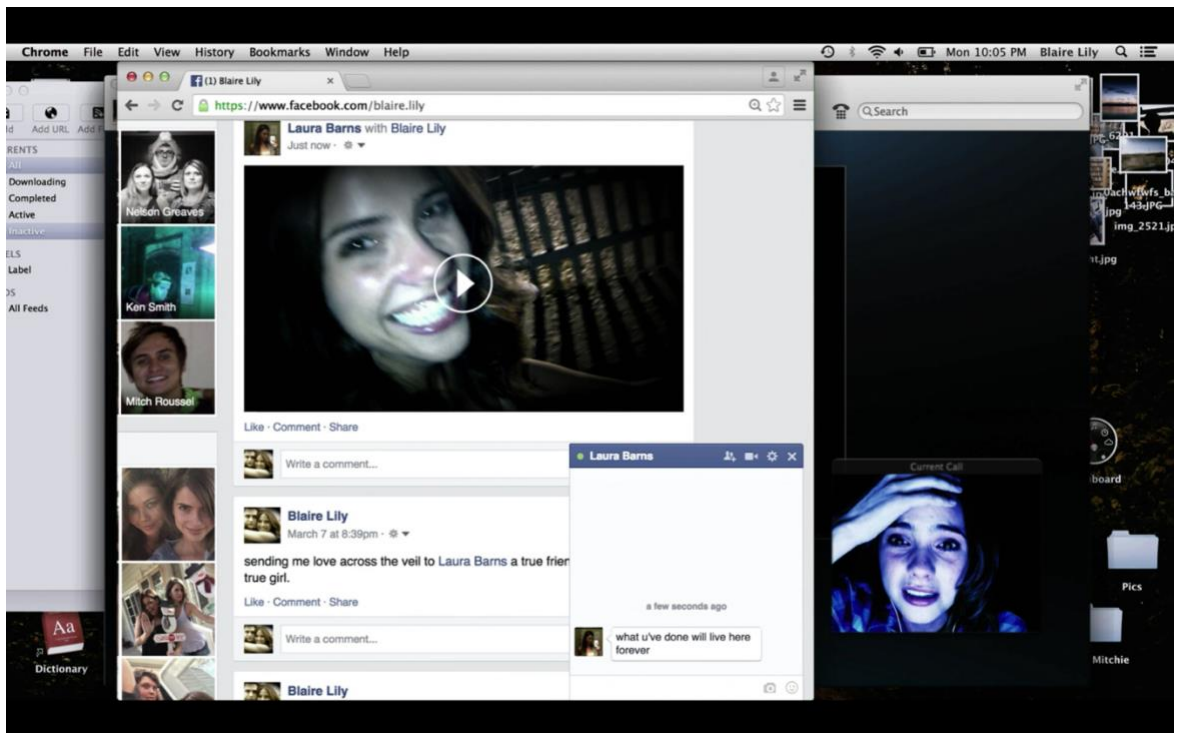


Figure 2.8 Laura messages Blaire (Shelley Hennig), ‘what u’ve done will live here forever’, just before uploading the unedited video showing Blaire involvement (*Unfriended*, 2015).

*Unfriended* concludes with Laura posting the unedited original video that Blaire shot on her smart phone to Facebook. This version includes footage not seen in any previous iterations: Blaire turning the camera on herself and laughing as she says, ‘I got her’. Laura’s message to Blaire at the conclusion of *Unfriended* suggests that Blaire’s role in shooting the video will be duplicated and will persist across the cloud as the embarrassing video of Laura similarly persists in continuing circulation. ‘[W]hat u’ve done will live here forever’ Laura messages. Laura not only ensures the likelihood of the video ‘living’ effectively forever on Facebook, she uses the tagging functions of Facebook to increase the visibility of the post. Laura makes the original, unedited video searchable and effectively widens the scope of the incident from the

personal to the *very* public. This highly significant concluding scene in *Unfriended* suggests not just the persistence and replicable affordances of data in networked publics, but also the related affordances of searchability and scalability.

As seen in *Figure 2.8*, the scene plays out in the widely familiar Facebook layout as a new video is posted to Blaire's wall feed. The post has come from Laura Barns's Facebook profile and has tagged both Laura and Blaire. Some of the previous posts that include both Blaire and Laura are visible with Blaire's last tagged post about Laura commemorating their friendship. Posted March 7 (Laura committed suicide in early April), Blaire writes: 'sending me [*sic*] love across the veil to **Laura Barns** a true friend. A true spirit. A true girl'. It is not clear from this post alone whether Blaire is being genuine or if she is performing a socially acceptable form of grief online. I address the complexities surrounding the negotiation of online social interactions and grief as an especially potent point of context collapse online in chapter three. The comment, however, includes two points of interest independent of Blaire's social intention and online social persona management. While it is clear Blaire has not been a true friend, Laura *is* a spirit, but she is not sending or reciprocating any love from across the veil. The term 'veil' reinforces Laura as dead, but also suggests the updated 'electronic elsewhere' (Sconce, 2000) of the data cloud across which Blaire posted the message. It is the data cloud elsewhere from which Laura is posting to Blaire's Facebook wall.

The technical function of tagging is an important means of organizing the vast amounts of information circulated on and around the Internet and social media sites. Digital tagging, including hashtags on Twitter, enables vast amounts of information to be organized and more readily searched. It also widens the potential audience and

the scope and impact of the information. Tagging a Facebook friend makes the post available on both wall feeds, and becomes visible to the wider public according to the privacy settings of each user, establishing the post as either 'public' (the default setting for Facebook), visible to 'friends of friends', 'friends only', or the rarely used 'only me' setting. Tagging someone in this fashion generates a notification to the friends list of anyone tagged as the default setting (notification settings can also be managed in Facebook's privacy settings). In *Unfriended* this sort of tagging digitally links Laura and Blaire in a way that Laura's death ensures has no such material link. The prominent tag, including the timing, '**Laura Barns** with **Blaire Lily** – just now' is a clear depiction of *Unfriended*'s pairing of technical functionality and spectrality. Laura is a networked spectre: digitally and spectrally associated with Blaire.

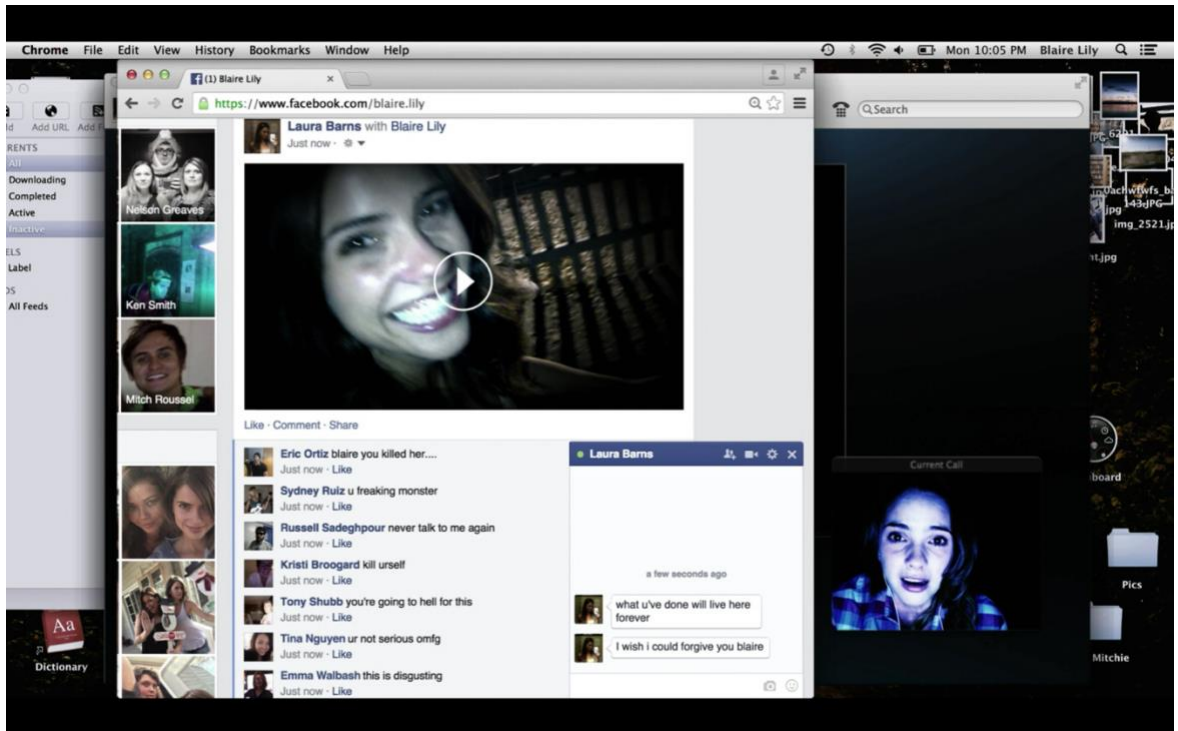


Figure 2.9 Despite her message 'I wish i could forgive you blaire', Laura tags her former best friend, ensuring that all their mutual friends will see Blaire's (Shelley Hennig) made the video. (*Unfriended*, 2015).

Before Laura signs off from the Skype call, leaving Blaire and the audience in the first uneasy silence since the start of the film, she sends one final Facebook message. Just before the comments from Blaire and Laura's online friend circles start flooding in, Laura writes: 'I wish i could forgive you blaire' [sic] (see Figure 2.9). Laura decidedly does not forgive her one-time friend, ensuring instead that Blaire's role in shooting the video will remain online 'forever'. Due to the technical architecture of digital tagging, in revealing Blaire's role in a joint tagged post, Laura also achieves a spectral, digital, immortality in the networked attention economy. In my networked spectrality reading of *Unfriended* Laura's unwillingness to forgive Blaire changes the scope of the haunting from the time-bound and conditional aspects of traditional



haunting, to haunting depicted as enduring according to the affordances of networked publics. Laura is both 'forever' vindicated *and* an enduring malign online presence/absence.

As shown in *Figure 2.9*, far from forgiving Blaire, Laura ensures that Blaire will suffer similar online abuses that drove Laura to take her own life. The responses from Blaire and Laura's friend circle range from shock to disgust to abuse in the exact same terms as those levied at Laura. The first post by user Eric Ortiz reads 'blaire you killed her...'. Sydney Ruiz writes 'u freaking monster'. More responses begin rapidly pouring in: 'never talk to me again', 'you're going to hell for this', 'ur not serious omfg [oh my fucking god]', 'this is disgusting'. Amid these responses user Kristi Broogard writes 'kill urself'. The phrase 'kill urself', including the abbreviated spelling of 'yourself' with 'ur' is the same phrase repeated on the many iterations of the embarrassing video of Laura. The implication is clear: having exposed Blaire's true role in orchestrating the entire video, Blaire will be subjected to the same torrent of online abuse as Laura.

Enabled by the Skype call frame narrative, for the entirety of the film thus far, Laura uses digital means to express her spectral vengeance rather than diegetic special effects (compared to the ghosts in *Pulse* which are obviously depicted as diegetic special effects or enhanced by them). But in a clunky scene similar to the conclusion of *Pulse*, *Unfriended* ends after Laura posts and tags Blaire in the unedited original video, and Blaire's fate is presumed as hands suddenly slam shut her laptop and Laura assails her in bed. Seeing Laura in the implied physicality of Blaire's room (rather than the digital Skype call) marks the only other time (apart from the glitching

company credits) during *Unfriended's* total run time to feature a perspective other than Blaire's laptop.

The audience has come to know Laura as an eminently spectral, digital presence who uses digital means to reap her revenge, so her physical appearance at the end is jarring not just because the perspective suddenly changes, but because it falls short of the associations between haunting and digital media technologies and use that have been so fervently developed over the previous 116 minutes. Still, there are several factors in *Unfriended* that are enriched by a networked spectrality reading including not a traditional, site bound depiction of haunting but the depiction of Laura's spectral omnipresence and omnipotence enduring across the cloud.

As a motive, the means of Laura's revenge are significant because Laura is not seeking to redress the tendency for teens to use online and social media technologies to bully, rather Laura propagates the cycle of cyberbullying. Although the film does not depict Laura in life, the friends allude to her propensity for bullying and online harassment numerous times throughout the film. To colour Laura as a cyberbully in life offers a parallel reading of *Unfriended*: Laura continues her cyberbullying in death. In *Unfriended's* final focus on Laura executing her spectral revenge according to the manor of her own suffering could be read as a conclusion more reminiscent of a traditional ghost story than as an example of a new media haunting. Where *Pulse* resorted to the same 'one last jump scare' trope of horror film conventions, there are a few important differences. *Pulse* concludes with the spectral Josh (Jonathan Tucker) in what appears to be his apartment – the scene of his suicide. In *Unfriended*, Laura ends her life at her school's playing field. Her

presence in her former best friend's room, then, still suggests Laura is untethered from the site specific. A further difference is that, from Blaire's (and the audience's) perspective, all the death's that she has witnessed could be explained as accidental or as elaborate suicides.

For a form-fitting traditional ghost story conclusion, Blaire should take her own life, at the same school playing field, after enduring the bullying she receives for her role filming and sharing the video. While that might be a *too* form-fitting traditional haunting, the film does not conclude in this fashion. On this point, the fact that Laura does not drive Blaire to suicide, and that Blaire's fate occurs off screen, is significant. In a networked spectrality reading, Laura's physical manifestation can be considered an extension of her digital omnipotence and omnipresence. Fully untethered from the site specific, Laura is depicted as exceeding the digital network and even the conditions of her spectrality. Having ensured that Blaire's guilt remains very public across the digital social networks for effectively forever – a type of destruction of Blaire's online persona and social reputation – Laura's appearance in the material realm is somewhat explained, if still poorly conceived and executed.

Ultimately, I write off Laura's physical presence at the conclusion of *Unfriended* as capitulation to horror film convention, a missed opportunity to be a truly innovative depiction of new media haunting. The film would be more ambiguous, but likely less popular and commercially successful, if it concluded with Laura ending the Skype call. Early versions of the script ended with the suggestion that Blaire would be investigated by the police as the serial murderer of her friends. Greaves has written the treatments of two possible *Unfriended* sequel story lines. One features Blaire struggling to cope with the bullying she receives after her role in

making the Laura video has been revealed. This appears incompatible with Laura's physical presence in the final sequence of *Unfriended* and has likely been scraped or incorporated into the other treatment for *Unfriended: Game Night*. Listed as in post-production on the Internet Movie Database (IMDb.com), the synopsis of *Unfriended: Game Night* teases: 'A teen comes into possession of a new laptop and soon discovers that the previous owner is not only watching him, but will also do anything to get it back' ('Unfriended: Game Night, 1990-2017). The film is expected for a 2018 release.

While audiences and critics await the next instalment of *Unfriended*, the depiction of such a digitally omnipotent ghost as Laura – one that is systemic and more associated with the network affordances of persistence, replicability and searchability, than traditional spectral mechanics – has broad implications for how new media hauntings resolve. Beyond generating franchise sequels, once associated with the systemic digital network and the cloud, the haunting becomes similarly enduring. The trope of haunting as enduring can be related to the affordance of networked publics boyd explains as scope: system-wide ghosts associated with the cloud expand the scope of haunting such that the ghost and haunting become impossible to exorcise just as information is notoriously difficult to totally remove from the web once uploaded. Extrapolated from the depiction in *Unfriended*, data is coloured as inherently spectral as a trope of new media hauntings.

### **Big Data, Privacy and Networked Spectrality**

In *Unfriended* the reaches of Big Data are a component that contributes to the very first images the audience sees, and is evident right alongside the narrative

about Laura Barns' suicide. A careful consideration of the opening sequence in *Unfriended* where Blaire clicks the link to watch the video that remains online of Laura taking her own life also includes some targeted adverts at the right-hand side of the screen (see *Figure 2.10*). The adverts are based on Blaire's browsing history, metadata 'cookies', and other 'personally identifiable information' (boyd, 2010b) that users regularly feed to the wide plurality of software, apps, platforms, etc. that contribute to Big Data bases which are also integral to the contemporary Internet media ecology. The networks that feed these databases are problematically called web 2.0, or sometimes web 3.0, or more frequently as the Internet of Things. boyd refers to these networks broadly as 'socially articulated data networks' (2010b). A discussion about the strengths and limitations of these terms are beyond the scope of this thesis, but networks that exchange data are fundamental to contemporary media use. As boyd notes, data 'sits at the foundation of Facebook, Twitter, Google, and every other social media tool out there' (2010b). Blaire is an avid participant in this media ecology as shown by the numerous tabs she has open in her browser: Facebook, Shop Forever 21, Tumblr, Free People Clothing, MTV's Teen Wolf, Wikipedia, Pinterest, searches for music lyrics, YouTube and many more throughout the film (see *Figures 2.7* and *2.11*).

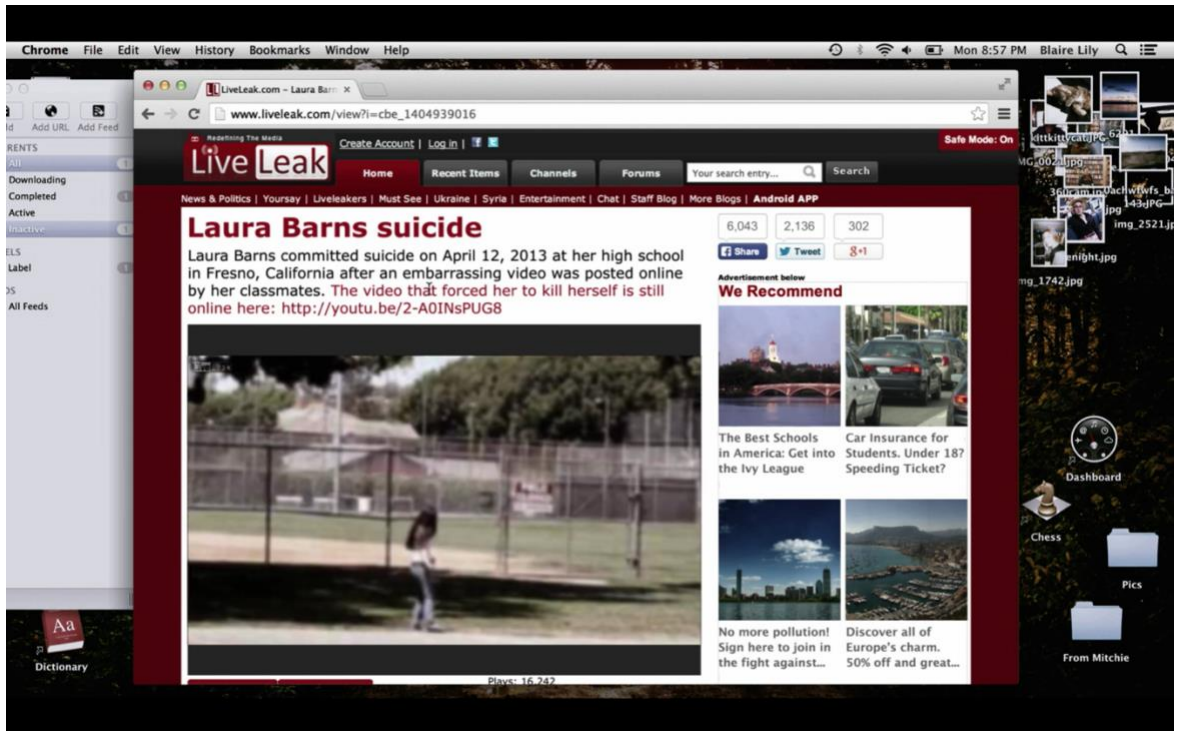


Figure 2.10 There are several key targeted adverts that indicate the presences of Big Data alongside the narrative of Laura's spectral vengeance (*Unfriended*, 2015).

Big Data knows Blaire's secrets long before Laura orchestrates the fateful game of Never Have I Ever to expose them. Before we learn that Blaire crashed Jess's mother's car while driving drunk, Big Data tells us that she is a reckless driver. In the opening sequence one of the 'We Recommend' adverts is 'Car Insurance for Students. Under 18? Speeding Ticket?' Before we learn that Jess was behind circulating rumours that Blaire has an eating disorder, we see two sponsored Facebook adverts early on in *Unfriended*, one recommending natural alternatives for treating depression and the other encouraging healthy cooking options.

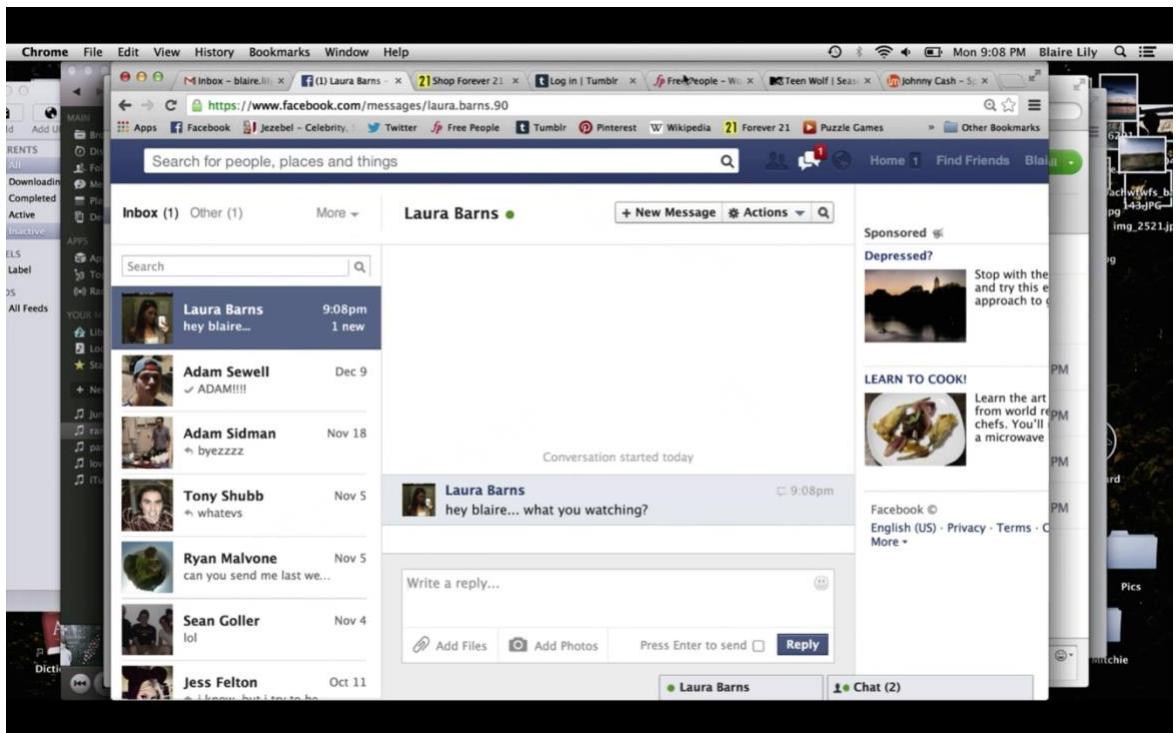


Figure 2.11 There is a tension between the hyper-presence of targeted Big Data adverts and Facebook's privacy settings taking place at the margins of Blaire's laptop screen (*Unfriended*, 2015).

Following boyd, to discuss privacy is to also discuss Big Data: the theme of privacy 'is completely intermingled with Big Data', she finds. Moreover, boyd considers 'our collective obsession with Big Data' the top destabilising factor of privacy: '[t]he biases and misinterpretations that are present in the analysis and use of Big Data are fundamentally affecting people's lives' (2010b). In the contemporary media ecology, the struggle for privacy is a tension between self-expression and the technical affordances of networked publics. Such a tension is at the heart of the interactions of the teens depicted in *Unfriended*.

Privacy, and the lack thereof, is a hyper-present concern in *Unfriended*. Apart from the obvious breaches of privacy that make up the narrative, there is a link to

Facebook's privacy settings nearly every time Facebook appears on screen in the film (it sits in a few different places in the layout of Facebook, occupying a similar sense of being 'tuned out' as contemporary users tend to disregard targeted adverts with repeated use, see *Figure 2.11*). Blaire does not realise the full implications of participating in the new media attention economy: the exchange of privacy for access.

In a detailed discussion of some of the challenges of privacy online, boyd (2010b) plainly states the tension between the desire for privacy *and* continued access. She also notes that establishing publicity as the default favours those who seek to capitalise on the data being generated: '[t]he opt-out norm in Facebook – and on many other sites – is not in the best interests of people; it's in the better interest of companies.' In response to an inquiry about Facebook's default 'Everyone' privacy setting by the US Federal Trade Commission (*In the Matter of Facebook, A Complaint*, 2010), According to boyd, Facebook celebrated the fact that 35% of users engaged with the new privacy settings features, but the statistic equally shows that most users do not change the default settings (2010b). To extrapolate from that fact, many users want to use Facebook and other available social networking platforms to participate in the new media attention economy, but do not realise the extent their data is publically available.

In her book, *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens* (2014), boyd finds,

[m]ore often than not, what people put up online using social media is widely accessible because most systems are designed such that sharing with broader or more public audiences is the default. Many popular systems require users



to take active steps to limit the visibility of any particular piece of shared content [...] In networked publics, interactions are often public by default, private through effort'. (p. 12)

boyd discovered this discrepancy between users' desire to participate and their expectations of privacy first hand during interviews with participants conducted in 2010:

[people] reasonably assume that what they do in public is ephemeral and that no one is witnessing their acts unless they're present [in the same physical space]. Mediating technologies change the equation. [...] Still, people do what they do and technology fades into the background. (boyd, 2010b)

boyd reviewed the privacy settings with her interviewees, finding across the board that people's desired level of privacy 'never matched' the default settings. 'Notably,' she finds, 'everyone that I talked to changed their settings to more private once they saw what their settings did' (2010b).

My networked spectrality reading of *Unfriended* considers the ghost of Laura Barns as suggestively multiple, omnipotent, omnipresent, participatory and enduring. It also reveals that the data cloud through which she circulates is likewise depicted as inherently spectral. Data, its generation, circulation, preservation and the many contexts it extends to is also a concern of cultural products that depict new media technologies and networks as the latest site of haunting. Big Data is culturally constructed in the early twenty-first century as spectral in numerous ways. Most users of new media technologies do not know what data is being collected about them, or how that data will be used. Equally, according to boyd (2010b), those in the

business of collecting data do not always know the context in which that data was generated, nor do they necessarily know the applicability of the data they mine.

The depiction of Laura Barns as enduring in the technical network of the Internet and the cloud, suggests cultural implications beyond social anxiety readings. She also reinforces the depiction of data as spectral: the spectral Big Data bases are all knowing and all powerful. They know more about the user than the user knows about themselves. Online, your memories and mistakes last forever, but which is which? Big Data muddles the public/private context of data and the people generating that data with potentially dangerous social consequences.

My networked spectrality reading uses *Unfriended* to consider how cultural attitudes about the cloud as a means of haunting affects attitudes toward data, its circulation, its persistence, and its scope in lived social life. Cultural associations between the persistence and circulation of information on the Internet and stored and accessed via the cloud, and spectrality, give way to much of the fearful cultural associations with Big Data. Big Data sits among the top of contemporary concerns over the increasingly blurry division between the public and private spheres. The point is an important one because it helps articulate the effects of the association of data and spectrality that are being normalised in society as points of anxiety, matters to legislate or survey by the state, and give way to political interpretations and responses. I address some such political implications in my chapter five on *CSI: Cyber*.

*Unfriended* depicts the new media haunting trope of the spectral association with data, context collapse around the theme of privacy, and the persistence of spectral data across eminently contemporary digital networks, perhaps indefinitely.

My networked spectrality analysis demonstrates how the themes of privacy, the

affordances and attention economies of networked publics, and the reach of Big Data are being depicted in new media haunting cultural products, but are also solidifying cultural associations between data and spectrality. In the next chapter, I use networked spectrality to consider how the persistence of mediated remains can confound the grieving process and result in multiple continuums of enduring haunting, achieving a more ambiguous depiction of new media haunting than the capitulation to horror film convention evident in *Pulse* and *Unfriended*.

### Chapter Three – *Ghost* and 'Be Right Back': Grief, Context Collapse, and Networked Spectrality

Representations of multiple, nodular, participatory and enduring ghosts abound in new media hauntings, a marked difference from traditional depictions of ghosts. The relationship between such themes seems self-evident in films like *Pulse* (2006, see chapter one) and *Unfriended* (2014, discussed in chapter two) because of their overt digital aesthetic of haunting and the depiction of the spectral character of data. In this chapter I argue that an intimate domestic setting and the experience of grief indicate social contexts of new media hauntings, themes that are no less multiple, participatory and enduring for being personal and subtle. This chapter focuses on *Ghost* (1990) and the 'Be Right Back'<sup>6</sup> episode of *Black Mirror* (2013). Both texts depict the experience of grief after the loss of a loved one in the framework of a ghost story. I consider this focus on grief and its inclusion of the spectral as a social context of networked spectrality. The narratives of *Ghost* and 'Be Right Back' are personal and domestic in comparison to the global reach of the digital spectres in *Pulse*, but they demonstrate the progression of themes of multiplicity and enduring haunting depicted as deeply problematic multiple continuums of grief. Such depictions imbue the technical property of persistent information with the affective quality of a personal experience of enduring haunting.

In *Ghost*, Sam (Patrick Swayze) learns to mediate himself by channelling his spectral power through his absent body, and 'jumping' into the body of spiritual

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<sup>6</sup> On Internet and text messaging platforms the short hand for 'Be Right Back' is BRB signaling a brief absence from the keyboard. The episode is intentionally evoking this context as an additional layer of Ash (Domhnall Gleeson) returning as a mediated absent presence.

medium Oda Mae Brown (Whoopi Goldberg). In its depiction of the importance of mediated subjectivity and identity, I argue that *Ghost* pre-empts one of the principal contemporary functions of the digital avatar. Because of the way avatars mediate aspects of self, they are both profoundly 'self' and profoundly 'other' with the distinctions between the two becoming increasingly unclear. As Sam retains his unique immutable essence as a ghost, digital avatars can retain the same identifiers of self as their pilot, in life and in death. As a trope of new media hauntings, when the pilot dies, the avatar can become a spectral representation: a ghost impregnated with essential identifiers of the living pilot's self that can continue to circulate in digital networks long after its referent. This trope serves the sentimental tone of *Ghost* and its overall message of enduring love. It is also the basis of the haunting in 'Be Right Back'.

The 'Be Right Back' episode of Charlie Brooker's International Emmy-winning series *Black Mirror* fictionalises questions facing contemporary society as users of new media technologies encounter death. It depicts the reconstruction of a lost love into an interactive database comprised of photos, video and posts to online social media sites, which later becomes housed in a biotechnical body. What begins as a means of offsetting grief, and announcing Martha's (Hayley Atwell) pregnancy to her deceased boyfriend, Ash (Domhnall Gleeson), becomes a persistent, uncanny reminder of her loss. Martha ultimately accuses the embodied 'performance' of her dead beloved as 'not enough': just painful, haunting, 'ripples'.

Where I consider *Ghost's* Sam more on the material side of the material/informational binary, I use networked spectrality to read Ash as an informational example of the spectral. Unlike Swayze who hardly misses any screen

time, Gleeson is largely *physically* absent throughout much of the episode. Despite this, Ash remains highly significant in the episode as Martha comes to increasingly depend on her communication and connection to the collected database of his online communications. Both Sam and Ash are hyper-present yet spectrally absent in their respective narratives, but the emphasis on new media technologies represents an important change in the depiction of ghosts from the material toward the informational, specifically the association between ghosts and data.

Resurrection and immortality through technology are established conventions of science fiction. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1819/1832) is an early example often considered as the root from which the science fiction genre has boomed (Aldiss, 1973). Many nineteenth century novels occupy an ambiguous status between the gothic and science fiction genres, and the points of overlap remain evident in contemporary cultural products. In such a way, I examine 'Be Right Back' as a ghost story rather than through the generic mode of a robot or clone story. Although ghost stories are not always associated with the gothic (see Cox and Gilbert 1991; Baldick, 2009; Hay, 2011), I situate *Ghost* and 'Be Right Back' within the framework of contemporary gothic scholarship to help underpin the thematic pairing of the mysteries of death with similar uncertainties surrounding cultural attitudes towards technological advancement, depicted in a register of haunting. My interest is in how mediated remains become imbued with the essential identifiers of self of the deceased, and how the persistence of those remains in digital networks can open onto multiple continuums of grief akin to haunting.

Through the lens of networked spectrality, Ash's virtual and eventually embodied return indicates a concern with present-absences and the material

informational dichotomies associated with contemporary ghost stories. These elements of spectrality intersect with new media technologies, complicating traditional models of haunting. Networked spectrality helps critically underpin the pairing of Ash's ghostly online presence and his embodied avatar, which is banished to the attic in conventional gothic fashion, where he/it manifests as a multiplicity of uncanny hauntings that disrupt the lives of Martha and their daughter. This is the new media hauntings treatment of the technophilic, sentimental depiction of enduring love in *Ghost*, recast as an enduring continuum of grief.

Over twenty years separate *Ghost* and 'Be Right Back' but the depiction of an experience of grief akin to haunting contributes to the continuing cultural association between technology and the spectral. Little has changed in the depiction of grief as a context of haunting stretching back to the spiritualism of the nineteenth century, if not before. What has changed is the media ecology that both depicts narratives of grief and haunting, and adds new mediated complexities to the experience of grief. In its mix of romance and comedy with the spectral, *Ghost* may seem like an unlikely new media hauntings text. But in its innovative portrayal of spectrality from the perspective of the ghost the themes of mediated subjectivity, the emotional and material experience of remembrance and the navigation of grief are foregrounded.

Although the tone of *Ghost* is sentimental, its treatment of an experience of grief akin to haunting prepares the way for contemporary depictions of new media hauntings. Additionally, the narrative is structured around a money laundering computer crime. In the range of texts I consider in this thesis, the late 1980s/early 90s setting of *Ghost* represents the earliest treatment of the overlap between technology and spectrality. Although the role of the computer may seem like a

forgettable detail, as a plot device it is not significantly different to some of the premises of *CSI: Cyber* (2015-2016) episodes discussed in chapter five.

As a steadfast symbol of mediating the material and the informational, the computer, like the dominant media technologies before it, shares historic cultural associations with haunting. I examine *Ghost* as an important example of the themes that develop into the readily identifiable tropes of the new media hauntings in a cultural moment before widespread use of the commercial Internet, and before the so called 'dot com' boom and bust of the early 2000s. I consider the inclusion of the nascent computing and data environments of *Ghost* an example of the ghost story portraying the latest technologies as a site and/or source of haunting, as *Poltergeist* (1982) is often considered in its depiction of the television. I consider the turbulence of the 'dot com' boom and bust a significant factor in the homogenisation (including its corporate and capitalistic face, and ongoing drives toward regulation) of the contemporary digital media ecology. The homogenisation of Internet functionality, social use, and innovation as the result of stability, has led to the data environments that enable the cloud, for example, and which, as I argued in the introduction, have shaped new media hauntings. While the aesthetic of haunting in *Ghost* is enabled by computer generated effects, it is not yet the all-prevailing overtly digital aesthetic of haunting of *Pulse*, but is an important part of the trajectory.

While *Ghost* is as much a 'Hollywood studio' production as *Pulse* or *Unfriended*, trends in production have changed significantly since the 1990s to accommodate digital production practices. The production histories of *Pulse* and *Unfriended* are considerably different to *Ghost*, but the influence of the studio and the generalisations about Hollywood studio production models still broadly apply.



*Black Mirror* is several degrees removed from the current model of Hollywood studio production, beyond the fact that it is a television show not a film. *Black Mirror* is a product of British models of 'gothic television' as Eddie Robson (2007) observes them, including an aesthetic that appears to be partially a product of time and budgetary constraints and demographic and timeslot assumptions related to the presenting channel, Channel 4. The programme has largely maintained any effects these constraints may have had on the overarching aesthetic of the show *as an aesthetic* of the *Black Mirror* series as the show has moved to its new home on Netflix (which has its own production house quirks).

These production factors influence the aesthetic of haunting depicted in *Ghost* and 'Be Right Back', and can be extrapolated as tropes of new media hauntings – especially the depictions of haunting as multiple and enduring. Although the representation of the ghost as systemic digital omnipresence falls short in *Pulse*, an intimate, personal depiction of grief evolves from the technophilia of *Ghost* into the multiple continuums of enduring haunting depicted in 'Be Right Back'. In this regard, my reading of *Ghost* provides a technophilic counterpoint to my reading of *Pulse* in chapter one. Similarly, my inclusion of the comparatively independently produced 'Be Right Back' is a deliberate effort to demonstrate new media hauntings from a range of production models.

By considering grief as a social context of networked spectrality, the pairing of *Ghost* and 'Be Right Back' helps forge associations between technology and death which colour cultural attitudes about technological advance. Although the themes of haunting are less evident in (but not absent from) *Ghost*, the film serves an important function in this thesis as the most obvious example of technophilic cultural

attitudes toward technological advance. Other examples are the Internet communities exemplified by Anonymous and Slender Man discussed in chapter four. I extrapolate the claim of technophilia in *Ghost* from its emphasis on mediumship and mediated subjectivity. The narrative events and plot structure of *Ghost* and 'Be Right Back' are highly similar and it does not take much to turn the heart-warming classic story of enduring love to one of deeply problematic grief and enduring haunting. To that end this chapter draws on the affordances of networked publics as identified by danah boyd (2010a): persistence, replicability, scalability and searchability. The pairing of *Ghost* and 'Be Right Back' depicts the ramifications of new media on the process of grief and remembrance. It also depicts the context of how remembrance of the dead can collapse when the dead have limited continued agency though mediated technical persistence.

Grief and remembrance are important thematic accompaniments to the subject of death in lived social experience and fiction, especially in gothic fictions. *Ghost* and 'Be Right Back' richly demonstrate networked spectrality because they depict the problematization of grief by gothically blurring aspects of remembrance, haunting and new media technologies; all contexts prone to collapse as mediated remains are depicted as outliving their subject. In a progression from *Ghost* to 'Be Right Back', this chapter considers the material and emotional presence and absence, complicated by enduring, mediated remains of the dead as indicators of the networked spectrality themes of multiplicity and persistence. The complexities around these themes can be understood as the spectral instituting a collapsing of distinct contexts, another specific aspect of networked spectrality. In *Ghost* and 'Be Right Back's depictions of multiplicity and persistent, mediated remains, death

becomes the ultimate form of context collapse, presenting a (networked) spectral challenge to social interactionism and models of presentation of self.

### **Multiplicity in *Ghost*: The Disembodied Gut and the Ghost as Digital Avatar**

*Ghost* has an enduring popular legacy, but its place in the history of ghost scholarship is frequently overlooked. Linda Badley is the first to pay it serious scholastic attention in her book *Film, Horror and the Body Fantastic* (1995). Badley's position is that as 'the ghost became a metaphor for the fantastic in an increasingly sophisticated sense [...] the issue shifted from the epistemological issue of ghost seeing or being haunted to the ontological situation of the ghost, whose problems of marginality, orientation, and manifestation represented the human condition' (p. 45). These advancements are specifically related to new special effects technologies and techniques.

The depiction of the spectral and the theme of haunting in *Ghost* hails from a time before a digital and glitch aesthetic came to constitute essential tropes of contemporary depictions of haunting (Olivier, 2015). All the special effects in *Ghost* are riffs on the theme of ghosts passing through material objects (see *Figure 3.1*). Such a ghosting effect, prominent in the film and remarkable for its time but tame by today's digital special effects standards, is an early example of the complexities of visualising the material and spectral mechanics of the ghost. The film foregrounds Sam's physicality whilst alive through his intimacy with Molly, especially the effect of his unique touch. This repeated allusion is sustained by the predominance of the Righteous Brother's (1965) song 'Unchained Melody' throughout the film which

features the line 'I've hungered for your touch' in several verses. Badley expresses the trope as a tension between physicality and spirituality in her analysis.



Figure 3.1 The 'ghosting' special effects in *Ghost* (*Ghost Trailer*, 2007).

For Badley, the physical/spiritual spectral mechanics in *Ghost* keep the film topical, an example of what she considers 'hauntings of the surface' (1995, p. 45). Rather than using haunting to probe social issues concerning 'the sense that we are victims, helplessness against urban violence, the displacement of the person by the machine, inequities of class, race, and power' (p. 60), Badley understands the film as a celebration of mediumship and media:

'[T]he spectator (which the postmodern subject has become) was by implication a sort of ghost, realizing a self in images or media. Identity, *Ghost*

finally said, was embodied or enabled by a medium—a body, clay, word, or screen' (1995, p. 61).

Writing before the cultural dominance of the Internet, Badley concludes her observations about *Ghost*, 'the medium was still the only real message' (p. 61).

Marshal McLuhan's (1967) observation that 'the medium is the message' continues to be quoted and debated by media theorists studying the contemporary media ecology. I subscribe to digital ethnographer Michael Wesch's understanding of the phrase, as mediums change, conversations begin to change and as conversations begin to change, people begin to change (*An Anthropological Introduction to YouTube*, 2009). Wesch's position is informed by Postman's response to McLuhan in which he understands new types of media ushering in new forms of 'truth-telling' (1987). The mediums, conversations and people, have changed since *Ghost* was first screened, and now they prominently include new media technologies, digital avatar representations of self, and app- and cloud-based data circulation and storage. The physical/spiritual dichotomy *is* central to the film and an important point in the trajectory of the material/informational cultural associations with the spectral in new media hauntings. But despite Badley's awareness of the role of media in *Ghost* she does not focus on the centrality of the computer to the plot beyond noting the use of computer generated special effects. As I argue, the focus on mediation and media establish an association between ghosts and digital avatars. Furthermore, such a focus depicts numerous contexts that collapse as the film blurs aspects of identity and belief in the spectral. *Ghost* sometimes seems to prioritise multiplicity but also presents steadfast, readily identifiable markers of self that continue after death.

*Ghost* actively and intentionally blurs expectations of materialism and spectrality as the prevailing narrative trope. When Sam changes the MAC code to the account his one-time friend Carl (Tony Goldwyn) is using to launder money, he changes a piece of *information* that has important *material implications*. To access the money Carl must first obtain the correct password. Fortunately for Carl, Sam writes the password in his address book, mediating the information into the material storage device of the address book. By today's standards, having the plot revolve around a physical paper trail seems like a clunky narrative device that has been surpassed by computer hacking plots (a theme I take up more in chapter five). Still, the narrative device highlights the role of *knowledge* whether as a *skill gap* in the case of a hacker or the use of Sam's awareness of the MAC code which enables him to foil Carl's plan. Sam convinces Oda Mae to embody the fictional account holder, Rita Miller, and with the knowledge of the MAC code, they cash out the account before Carl can transfer the stolen funds. Thus, Sam exploits the blurry complexities of the material/information and distinctly spectral relationships present in the film. *Ghost* blurs the division between the physical and the spectral to the point of paradox. To affect the human realm, the spectral characters mentally channel their own disembodiment to produce a physical effect. Sam affects the fictitious real of the film 'through body images' (Badley, 1995, p. 60), or what I term 'the disembodied gut'.

Sam learns to affect the human realm from the territorial and violent Subway Ghost (Vincent Schiavelli). To manipulate objects in the physical realm, the Subway Ghost emphasises Sam's lack of a body:

'You ain't got a body no more, son. It's all up here [pointing to his head] now.

If you want to move something, you got to move it with your mind'.

Despite trying to convince Sam that his body is gone and only his mind, or some other essence remains, he corrects Sam when he fails by telling him to push all his emotions into his stomach: 'You gotta take all your emotion, all your anger, all your love, all your hate, and push it, way down here into the pit of your stomach'.

According to the spectral mechanics of *Ghost*, even while Sam must accept his lack of a body, the body remains an important factor even if it is acting as (or against) a metaphor. 'Maneuvering [*sic*] as a ghost', Badley explains, 'means learning to "imagine" subjectivity as a disembodied state in a site that does not exist, to the extent that the perspective of the film makes the viewer all the more keenly aware of the powers of embodiment' (1995, p. 60). When Sam eventually succeeds, the Subway Ghost congratulates his use of his disembodied gut: 'Way to go kid! [...] From your gut, like I told you'. Although Sam remains disembodied he can call upon his spectral 'mind' and 'gut' to manipulate the material world.

The paradox of the disembodied gut reflects an important *dramatic conceit* in *Ghost* – the depiction of Sam as both 'there' as a ghost and 'not there' because he is dead. The film's narrative continuity depends on this conceit but also confounds it when convenient. When he is at his most stereotypically ghostly – writing 'BOO' in a fogged-up bathroom mirror and sending household objects flying around the apartment – Sam is *not* depicted. But when Sam and Molly share one last dance at the film's conclusion, with the aid of Oda Mae as medium, Sam is depicted rather than Oda Mae. I consider Sam's use of Oda Mae and the film's emphasis on mediums and mediations an early association between ghosts and digital avatars.

As an early example of the thematic associations between ghosts and digital avatars, it is fitting that Sam eventually mediates himself, avatar-like, through a computer. When Sam haunts Carl in their office, and through Carl's computer, it is a clear example of what Sconce calls 'electronic presence'. In *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (2000), Sconce observes that media communications technologies have a long association with spectrality and the dead: sometimes as a means of contacting or channelling spirits, but also imagined as a wholly different realm to visit, be abducted to, or trapped within. In media's capacity to relay information, they can appear to have agency, a 'liveliness' that easily becomes related in terms of haunting. 'Sound and image without material substance,' Sconce writes, 'often evoke the supernatural by creating virtual beings that appear to have no physical form'. The experience of such a disincarnate 'being' makes the apparatus seem haunted (2000, p. 4). These are the spectral mechanics Sam uses to make Carl's computer appear haunted.

Sam types 'M-U-R-D-E-R-E-R' on Carl's keyboard, but the camera shows the keys being pressed by an unseen hand. It is as if the computer itself is calling Carl a murderer. When Carl asks out of fear, 'Who is doing that?', Sam relishes in identifying himself by spamming his name 'SAMSAMSAMSAM', across the screen. This type of techno-mediated spectral communication is a bedrock trope of new media hauntings evident in *Pulse* and *Unfriended*. From this encounter with Sam playing on the haunting 'electronic presence' associated with media, this sequence initiates Carl's belief in Sam as a ghost, and pushes him to darker and more frantic actions as he comes to realise Sam's interference in his scheme.



The spectral is the avenue *Ghost* uses to explore the theme of blurry identity boundaries and the differences between appearance and authenticity. Several of the characters like Carl and Willie (Rick Aviles) are not who they say they are. Oda Mae has a criminal record for distributing fake identification cards. The very presence of Sam as a ghost complicates themes of identity because his unique essence remains after his physical life stops (a specifically spectral form of context collapse). The merging of Sam and Oda Mae's identities provides a significant example of the film's focus on blurry identity boundaries, and the sort of medium/media relationships such blurring suggests. I have paired the characters off to help demonstrate the degree to which their identities are malleable and distributive. Unpacking the complexities of these social interactions and how these contexts collapse (or are prone to collapse) help establish my identity pairings. The characters Willie Lopez and Rita Miller demonstrate the complexities around the physical and informational divide.

In what would otherwise seem like a small detail, even a continuity error, the spelling of Willie is consistently interchanged with Willy. When Sam checks the name on Willie's mailbox it reads 'Willy Lopez'. The 'Willy' is set in a moveable text beneath a glass cover plate. The surname 'Lopez' is lettered on a piece of red plastic label tape, stuck on the surface of the glass (see *Figure 3.2*). Sam reads both layers together: "Willy Lopez". But when Molly goes to the police they are unable to match any records to that name. The various spellings of Willie, and the false surname 'Lopez' provide a protective ambiguity in the form of an avatar-like mask. But Willie's physical address can, and does, give him away, as in the scene where he visits Oda Mae at her storefront and she addresses him as 'Prospect Place Willie?'



*Figure 3.2 Sam learns Willie's physical address from the name plate on his mailbox (Ghost, 1990).*

Rita Miller, on the other hand, is a totally disembodied, digital non-identity. 'She' is a receptacle, a placeholder for money before it gets transferred into the tax-sheltered Nassau account of the drug dealers for whom Carl is laundering. 'She' is an avatar created by Carl to act as the medium for his unlawful transaction: the ambiguous virtual avatar opposite Willie. 'She' is never intended to have a body: a ghost in the machine, digital residue to be forgotten or deleted after the money has cleared the account. Whereas Willie's identity is constructed in terms of his physicality, Rita's is virtual. Willie is a thug, the hired muscle and an overtly physical presence with a physical address. Carl only ever intended Rita Miller to be a virtual presence, with a virtual 'address'. 'Rita Miller' was meant to be as virtually ambiguous and protected as the protection Willie's name was meant to afford him. But by impersonating her, literally giving her a physical presence, Sam and Oda Mae exploit that ambiguous avataresque relationship, foiling Carl's plan. In short, Sam and

Oda Mae collapse the context Carl intended for his avatar 'Rita Miller' in a wholly unexpected way; a way that has an important spectral dynamic.

Since Sam uses Oda Mae to affect the physical realm on his behalf, it is through her that identity markers and markers of identification are explored in the most depth. Sam has the memories, emotions and constructed identity of his living self *and* his ghost identity. This is combined with an ability to mediate his ghostly intentions to affect the physical realm and enter a living vessel making a composite of both identities. Oda Mae's criminal record, the various incarnations of her scams, and her position as Spiritual Medium are facets of her character critical to her mutable identity depicted in her strikingly different appearance documented by her various mug shots. The initial suggestion is that her practice of offering sham solace at a price is as morally dubious as her selling people a chance to appear as someone else is criminal.

When Oda Mae is first introduced she is exploiting her exclusively widowed middle-aged female client base with theatrical attempts to contact their husbands. But to make a convincing and profitable show, she must fish for marks of identification in the client. Depicted as a comic scene in *Ghost*, it is indicative of the sort of computer hacking known as 'phishing' and is also suggestive of the digital practice, 'catfishing'. Both digital tactics use an adopted persona to try to solicit and capitalise on the information provided voluntarily from the victim. These techniques are enabled by the same affordances of the internet that structure legitimate and desired communication across the same new media platforms.

Oda Mae's fraudulent business practice changes when she realizes that she is genuinely able to communicate with ghosts. It is in this context that Oda Mae's

identity markers totally collapse. When the ghost of Orlando 'jumps' into her body, she temporarily 'bloats' to accommodate his heavier set size, her voice and mannerisms are altered, but her physical appearance remains her own. Her body is temporarily overridden by Orlando's subjectivity. While this is a violation of Oda Mae's position as medium it has important implications about the presentation of her identity because after embodying Rita Miller, she eventually allows Sam to use her body as a vessel.

In his many explorations of avatar-based games and platforms, Mark Stephen Meadows (2008) identifies the avatar/user relationship as a pilot/vehicle relationship. A vehicle is often considered an extension of the self. It can also be an important aspect of self-construction and self-representation. An avatar depends on input from the user just as a vehicle depends on its pilot. In *Ghost*, Oda Mae's avatar-like embodiment of the digital presence 'Rita Miller' is the inverse of Sam's disembodiment when he becomes an avatar-like ghost. When Oda Mae embodies Rita Miller, she effectively becomes the pilot of an avatar. Among the many definitions Meadows gives for the term is that an 'avatar allows you to become an interactive character in which you can affect, choose, or change the plot of the story' (2008, p.15). This is precisely what Oda Mae does with Sam's spectral help.

With Rita Miller, Oda Mae is set up as the pilot of the avatar, whereas when she offers her body to Sam she becomes the avatar being piloted. This switching between the avatar and the pilot is mirrored in Sam's manipulating of Carl's computer to seem inhabited, and again when he 'jumps' into Oda Mae's body. Sam's use of Oda Mae is highly sentimental, even the most romantic part of the film in Rubin's reflection: 'The idea of being able to touch someone you love once more. To

feel there's a very specific touch. To know it's them' (*Ghost* Commentary, 1990). But expounded as a trope of new media haunting, the affordances surrounding digital avatars reinforce the themes of multiplicity, can confound the grieving process and become a source of enduring haunting.

### **Early Iterations of Networked Spectrality: 'Ditto', Context Collapse and Grief**

Articulating spectrality in terms of presence and absence introduces some of the basic network mechanics surrounding digital avatar-based communication, including the prospect of context collapse. Because avatar-based communication adds a layer of mediated representation to co-present and asynchronous communications, it requires a degree of trust. Since the identity of a user is not always easily confirmable as genuine across many new media communications platforms, it opens a cultural space for uncertainty and moral panic often expressed as anxiety about anonymity online, cyber-bullying or stalking, or fostering other criminal or dubious behaviour. This aspect of mediated communication takes on additional complexities when death is added to the equation and fosters more opportunities for specific contexts to collapse.

Isabella Van Elferen (2009) has written that cyberspace confounds the material information binary making it a gothic space in which users encounter the uncanny. The spectral mechanics in *Ghost* function in a similar way. According to *Ghost* script writer Bruce Joel Rubin's conception of the spectral mechanics in the film, belief is the profound enabler:

your mind creates the world. Your mind believes that if you sit on something solid, and it's solid, then there's no problem. [...] As soon as you believe you

can walk through a wall, you can walk through a wall. (*Ghost Commentary*, 2001)

Belief links the material and the spiritual even as it transcends both. It is through this aspect of transcendence that Sam becomes related to contemporary digital avatars, and the experience of cyberspace.

In her description of the wider social implications of depicting the ghost's subjectivity, Badley nearly matches Meadows's definition of an avatar as an 'interactive social representation of a user' (2008, p. 13). Citing Sam's need to spiritually commit himself to Molly, Badley writes,

[Sam] has to learn to break through from the other side, to manifest himself to the living—to *become* in the ontological sense. The film focuses on the terror, loneliness, and power of the ghost's ontology and that emerges as a metaphor for the human condition. [...] The afterlife is portrayed as a universal problem, of how to manifest oneself, affect events—make oneself visible, palpable, present in the world- to realize oneself. (1995, p. 60)

An avatar allows a user to *become* in the ontological sense, to make oneself visible, palpable and present in and across cyberspace and data clouds.

Pairing the digital avatar with Sam as a ghost causes Badley and van Elferen's theories about the spectral to overlap in significant ways. The Internet allows users to navigate incredible amounts of information while remaining more or less physically stationary. For a time, avatar-based communications platforms dominated the Internet and while the premise remains largely the same, app-based and cloud databases have begun to change the face of the new media ecology. Still, like Sam's effort to manifest himself in the material realm, navigating the Internet through an

avatar requires a similar identification with a disembodied subjectivity in a state where tangible identifiers of self are far from evident. As discussed in chapter one, the Internet depends on a technical structure comprised of many virtual nodes that relay the networked information, but this is increasingly obscured by the functionality of the digital technology.

Thematically, *Ghost* could be read according to Baudrillard's (1994) orders of simulacra. As a ghost, Sam is a virtual simulation of himself and eventually becomes as effective in death as in life, if not more so. In Baudrillardian terms Sam's ghost is a simulation of his living subjectivity. In the film's terms, Sam could be considered the [dis]embodiment of 'ditto', his substitute for the phrase 'I love you'. The word 'ditto' and the " " ditto marks indicate the implied repetition or duplication of a referent. In its capacity as the implied, but often imperfect double, the ditto has links to the gothic trope of the double, as does the association between the ghost and the avatar.

According to Baudrillard's fourth order of simulacrum, the ditto should suffice in place of the original. Before Sam becomes a ghost, both he and Molly are aware that 'ditto' does not have the same meaning as 'I love you'. In a domestic scene indicating the couple have settled into their new home and life together, Molly confronts Sam about his aloofness:

SAM: It seems like whenever anything good in my life happens I'm just afraid I'm goin' to lose it.

MOLLY: I love you, I really love you.

SAM: Ditto.

The next scene is the iconic pottery scene where Sam and Molly have sex while 'Unchained Melody' plays on the jukebox. As Badley observes, in life Sam's physicality acts as a barrier to spiritual communication provoking his romantic problem: 'he can "make love" to Molly physically but he can't say the words "I love you," which mean a "spiritual" commitment' (1995, p. 59). Sam and Molly revisit this problem on their fateful walk home from a *Macbeth* performance:

MOLLY: Do you love me Sam? [...] Why don't you ever say it?

SAM: What do you mean [...] I say it all the time.

MOLLY: No you don't, you say "ditto" and that's not the same.

SAM: People say I love you all the time and it doesn't mean anything.

MOLLY: Sometimes you need to hear it, I need to hear it.

This conversation is broken up as the murderous Willie emerges from the shadows of a nearby alleyway.

When Sam is finally able to convince Oda Mae to convey his message of warning to Molly, she dismisses her as a fake until Sam tells her to say 'ditto' rather than 'I love you'. To fill out the second act, Molly wavers between trusting Oda Mae and considering her a fraud, but by the end of the film, through the dramatic conceit and her absolute belief, Molly can see the spectral Sam one last time: 'I love you Molly, I've always loved you. MOLLY: Ditto'. As Molly utters Sam's supplementary phrase, the simulation becomes impregnated with the meaning of the traditional phrase to henceforth stand in for the actual in no uncertain terms. Note that this is the seat of the film's profound wish fulfilment and sentimental depiction of enduring love.



*Ghost* is not just a captivating love story then, it is a love story that conquers death. The film closes with the earthly reunion of the semi-corporeal, semi-spectral Sam sharing a last kiss with Molly, now finally able to profess his love for her rather than his pet phrase 'ditto'. Sam says, 'The love inside, you take it with you', then ascends to the green screen of heaven where vaguely humanoid shapes receive him. The prevailing reading of this scene is a happy, sentimental, romantic ending. The tone of *Ghost* and the use of ghost story tropes are reconfigured around beneficent afterlife of reunion models to the point that belief surpasses the fiction of the film.

The qualities of being affective, proactive, of seizing the moment and living a meaningful life, get tied up with belief in ghosts and a conception of an afterlife of reunion. 'It's such an important wish fulfilment for people to be able to have completion in their lives and if you leave this world without completion,' Rubin comments, 'which is often the case, just the idea that you might have a shot at coming back and finishing something that was left undone, is very deeply important to the human psyche' (*Ghost* commentary, 2001). This powerful current of belief and profound wish fulfilment is what makes *Ghost* more than just a temporary immersion into the visual fantastic of a film. It normalises a sentimental attachment to the departed that, through an afterlife of reunion, keeps them accessible through various mediums such as memories, physical objects, people and technologies.

As the tag line, 'Believe!' exclaims (Ghost Taglines, 1990-2017), *Ghost* encourages belief in its spectral protagonist, or at the very least the suspension of disbelief. *Ghost* is so affective and compelling that Badley claims it 'became a ritual to some people who seem to have returned to the theatre, as others go to church (or séances), to be filled with the spirit' (1995, p. 60). In its depiction of the relationship

between technology and spectrality, and its sentimental prioritisation of an afterlife of reunion, *Ghost* can be situated in the history of haunted media Jeffrey Sconce (2000) identifies reaching back to the spectral mechanics surrounding nineteenth century spiritualism which was related to the development of the telegraph. As Sconce argues, the position of medium afforded women an unexpected position of social power and influence, in an unexpected setting. Within the setting of a séance women could voice social, political and gender inequalities and subvert other rigid social structures such as mixed gender hand holding or by condemning domestic abuse.

Part of the allure of spiritualism was the opportunity for reunion with a loved one and emotional solace but it is a small perspective shift from an experience of grief akin to haunting. As Sconce observes, a concerted effort by nineteenth century institutions of science and morality seized upon the popularity of séances and the female spirit medium practitioners to discredit the sentimentalism of spiritualism, labelling mediumship as a type of hysteria to which women could fall prone. It takes surprisingly little to change the sentimental tone of an afterlife of reunion to the trope of enduring haunting, a shift related to the navigation of grief, mediation and spectrality. The séance gone bad is an enduring trope of both traditional and new media hauntings.

In many significant ways, a digital avatar resembles a 'ditto', a simulation of the referential person. The association between the ghost and the avatar becomes more complex when linked to mourning because it profoundly affects the concept of remembrance. Remembrance is also a context prone to collapse as it becomes associated with the affordances of networked publics, especially the tendency for

replication and persistence. But encountering multiple, persistent, mediated remains of a loved one can open onto a powerful continuum of grief akin to haunting – because the simulation is *not* effectively the same as the referent, because they are both uncannily too similar and too static, or simply too other, thereby threatening to profoundly collapse the context of that relationship *as a type of haunting*. *Ghost* is an early exploration of these aspects of context collapse around mediated remains of a lost love. Through the paradoxical spectral mechanics of the disembodied gut, which blurs the material and informational, *Ghost* depicts identities and subjectivities as mutable and multiple, but also identifiable and singular. When Oda Mae relays Sam's deeply personal memories, information that seemingly only he could know, it threatens to confound Molly's grieving process, the very trope at the heart of 'Be Right Back'.

According to the depiction of haunting in *Ghost* and to an extreme degree in 'Be Right Back', actual or suspended disbelief in ghosts also affects the process of mourning. Like the depiction of Heathcliff after Cathy's death in *Wuthering Heights* (1847), an afterlife model that accommodates the immutable human essence of the ghost to remain accessible to its loved ones and eventually allows for an afterlife of reunion, complicates the process of mourning, threatening to plunge the mourner into perpetual melancholy (see Ariès, 1981; and Pearce, 2007). Similarly, identifying essential aspects of self in the mediated remains of the dead that can continue to circulate in digital networks can likewise affect the mourning and grieving processes.

In *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917) Freud theorises that death and loss are overcome by the attachment to the absent object being severed because of a 'reality test' wherein life continues for the mourner but not for the deceased:

Each single one of the memories and situations of expectancy which demonstrate the libido's attachment to the lost object is met by the verdict of reality that the object no longer exists; and the ego, confronted as it were with the question whether it shall share this fate, is persuaded by the sum of the narcissistic satisfactions it derives from being alive to sever its attachment to the object that has been abolished. (2001, p. 254)

This is the mental boundary that separates Freud's conceptions of the experiences of mourning and melancholia. They are distinguished by the alive/dead reality test based on the extent one desires life on one side, and tempered by the healing processes of time on the other. The appearance of a ghost complicates this reality test, prolonging the process of mourning or confounding it altogether, throwing the mourner into a state of melancholia (as would be the case for Prince Hamlet, Heathcliff, Mattie in *Pulse* and Molly). To follow this line of reasoning to its spectral extent, in the case of supernatural visitation one could not effectively get over the loss of a loved one if some identifiable part of their essence remained. According to Freud:

In mourning, too, the efforts to detach the libido are made in this same system; but in it nothing hinders these processes from proceeding along the normal path through the *Pcs.* to consciousness. This path is blocked for the work of melancholia [...]. Constitutional ambivalence belongs by its nature to the repressed; traumatic experiences in connection with the object may have activated other repressed material. Thus everything to do with these struggles due to ambivalence remains withdrawn from consciousness, until the outcome characteristic of melancholia has set in. (2001, p. 256)

Belief in ghosts or an encounter with a digital avatar that retains the same essential identifiers of self in death as the user had in life, can bridge the gap that Freud argues separates mourning and melancholia. The appearance of a ghost (or spectral digital avatar) would mean that the mourner's feeling would *de facto* be converted to melancholia because of the enduring reminder of the person. This is considered part of the rudimentary 'definition' of haunting, and is one reason why Freud and psychoanalysis have long dominated ghost scholarship (see Briggs, 1977). In her psychoanalytical musings on the present absences of the ghost, Avery Gordon considers haunting as performing an important social role and function, 'a constituent element of modern social life [...] neither pre-modern superstition nor individual psychosis; it is a generalizable social phenomenon of great import' (1997, p. 7). Because ghosts confound notions of the past, present and future, their appearance has important ripples on how the living remember and become haunted by the dead, especially as new media technologies are changing contemporary society's points of contact with mediated remains.

In its sentimentalising of the ghost, and its focus on the necessary relationship between ghost and media, *Ghost* helps popularise unfixed conceptions of identity, mediated through technology, like those now allowed by digital avatars. In its representation of blurry identity boundaries however, the ghost/avatar pairing indicates some of the contemporary concerns surrounding avatars, namely the ambiguity and context collapse associated with the differences between the virtual avatar and the actual 'real life' pilot. Linked to concepts of enduring love and remembrance, *Ghost* depicts a beneficent and sentimental relationship between spirit and medium, ghost and avatar. Conversely, the themes of enduring love and

fond remembrance are reflected through Brooker's *Black Mirror* series as mediated remains confounding the grieving process and developing into multiple continuums of problematic grief akin to haunting in the episode, 'Be Right Back'.

**'I'm not in that thing you know ... I'm remote. I'm in the cloud': Networked spectrality in 'Be Right Back'**

Charlie Brooker decided to call his dark satire about technology 'Black Mirror' as a commentary on how contemporary media is being consumed. The black mirror he is alluding to is the reflection of the viewer in the black of the television set, computer screen, or tablet (*Creator Charlie Brooker Explains... Black Mirror, 2014*). But a 'black mirror' also alludes to items used by spirit mediums for scrying, divination, and conjuring spirits, further reinforcing the cultural relationship between technology and spectrality. *Black Mirror* is a dark reflection on and commentary about the pervasiveness of new media technologies in contemporary society. As such, watching, participation, an insider view on journalism and media production, and the prioritisation of virtuality over the genuine and authentic in the near-future are the signature themes.

The series intentionally highlights the dangerous and dystopian aspects of technological advance that pose a threat to the moral and social order. It is the latest in a televised tradition of troubling viewers' relationships with technology, such as *The Twilight Zone* (1959 – 1964; 1985 – 1989; 2002 – 2003), *The Outer Limits* (1963 – 1965; 1995 - 2002), *Tales of the Unexpected* (1979 - 1988), and *Brass Eye* (1997 - 2001). Like its predecessors, *Black Mirror* depicts technological advance as a locus of profound socio-cultural unease, made even more palpable as it expands and

exaggerates contemporary social developments and cultural anxieties into a familiar near-future setting. Such a depiction serves to suspend the viewer's disbelief, and acts as relatable and referential to the viewer's own contemporary experience. A similar technique can be seen throughout the modern history of the ghost story (and science fiction), especially as it relates to technology (see Briggs, 1977; Sconce, 2000).

Brooker's reputation and previous body of work (*Nathan Barley* (2005), *Screen Wipe* (2006-2009), *Dead Set* (2008), and his collected books of TV and pop culture journalism) precede and inform the viewing context of *Black Mirror*. As a media pundit, writer and producer, Brooker brings a knowing quality to his depictions of media productions. As creator, show runner, and member of the writing team, Brooker ensures that all the *Black Mirror* episodes revolve around identifiable socio-technological themes knowingly situated in wider critical debates. This can reinforce the satirical elements, but also creates points in the narrative that both guide the audience and invite their participation in the wider (social) implications of the fictions. Careful viewers can spot Brooker's guiding hand in the structures of each episode.

'Be Right Back' chronicles Martha's trajectory of grief after the death of her long-term boyfriend, Ash. The couple is relocating to Ash's family's country home when Ash dies in a car accident. Upon learning that she is pregnant with Ash's child, Martha hesitantly communicates the news to a database collection of Ash's posts online. The relief provided by talking to the database becomes addictive. Despite constant indications of the 'creepy' implications, Martha chooses to house the database in a biotechnical body, creating an uncanny stand-in of her former beloved.

The episode concludes as the schism between the biotechnical Ash and her memories of the real Ash become increasingly clear, resulting in biotech Ash's exile to the attic in the same fashion as the other material mementos of his family.

Brooker has said part of his inspiration for 'Be Right Back' was an argument breaking out between an actual Twitter user and a bot based on the person's Twitter feed, creating a situation where a person is effectively arguing with a digitised version of him or herself (*BFI Q&A - Be Right Back*, 2013). As this summary indicates, there is a linguistic challenge in how to discuss the multiple iterations of Ash that are intentionally blurry but necessarily distinct.

The blurry distinctions between the multiple Ashes are enabled by Gleeson's portrayal of each. For the purposes of clarity in this chapter, 'Living Ash' designates Ash depicted as living, and indicates Martha and Ash's past experiences together. 'Database Ash' is used to discuss the interactive software that is collected from Living Ash's online communications data. Lastly, 'Embodied Ash' is used to indicate the composite of Ash's appearance, based on archived photos, the database of his social network utterances, and the biotechnical body that houses the software with its own evolving agency. I consider all representations of Ash after his death as ghostly figures. Embodied Ash is not a ghost of Living Ash in the traditional sense, however, because there is no returning supernatural agent. But through a consideration of networked spectrality, and his perfect likeness (in the actor's portrayal of all versions of the character) Embodied Ash is clearly a spectral stand-in for the deceased Ash.

The tone of 'Be Right Back' oscillates between the poles of humour voiced as 'funny' and the uncanny voiced as 'creepy'. This is the seat of the satire in the programme, although I consider 'Be Right Back' more in the register of the



contemporary gothic than an example of Brooker's more cunning or scathing satire (as in '15 Million Merits', or 'National Anthem' respectively). Death is not just a highly visible and prevailing theme of the episode, it is also subject to comedy. While Ash and Martha sing a duet on their road trip, Martha jokes about intentionally crashing the van. In his knowing, media savvy way, few details escape Brooker. The song Ash and Martha lovingly belt out is Yvonne Elliman's (1977), 'If I Can't Have You', suggesting the closeness of the couple, but also foreshadowing the themes of death and loss. The lines 'I don't want nobody baby, if I can't have you,' resonate throughout the episode, especially as an expression of the extent of Martha's grief. Like the prevalence of 'Unchained Melody' in *Ghost*, 'Be Right Back' uses music to highlight the essential identifiers of self that collapse in death.

The hyperawareness of death permeating the whole episode is most directly expressed when Living Ash shares a digital picture of an old photograph of himself left in his family home, across his social networks:

ASH: I'm just sharing that. I thought people might find it funny.

MARTHA: It's not funny, it's sweet.

ASH: Trust me. That day wasn't sweet.

Ash proceeds to tell Martha the story of a first family outing after the death of his brother and how the grief of that loss played out for his remaining family members. The scene calls attention to the scope of death evident in relation to the setting and as a thematic concern of the episode:

ASH: When I came down the next morning, all Jack's photos were gone from that wall. [Mum] put them in the attic. Is that how she dealt with stuff? And

then when Dad died, up went his photos. And she just left this one here. Her only boy giving her a fake smile.

This dialogue invests the setting with an intimate inheritance of loss. In addition to Ash's brother and father, the absence and assumed death of Ash's mother can be inferred, as can Martha's inheritance of Ash's family home when he dies. This off-screen trajectory of inheritance is a plot point full of gothic significance, since inheritance is a fundamental gothic concept. In addition to setting up a gothic narrative of inheritance, the subject of the scene is a context prone to collapse. Ash provides Martha with an insight into the photo's emotionally significant context but neglects to share the intimate details to his audience of online followers.

The scene depicts a moment from Ash's past that he remembers as decidedly 'not sweet' but that he invites people to 'check out' under the guise of finding it 'funny'. The bitterness and humour are genuine expressions of Ash's emotions toward the picture, but depict a gap between two different contextual audiences. Martha gets the personal, private story, while the digital public of 'friends' get flippant utterances. The tonal delivery of the line is drawn on later when Embodied Ash repeats the same 'funny' comment about the picture which the viewer recognises as impregnated with emotional significance, devoid in the second utterance. For Martha, the moments of emotional significance replaced by the flippant 'performances' of Ash's online utterances express the extent to which she values her memories of Living Ash, and how she feels they are in danger of being overwritten by the networked spectrality of Embodied Ash.

To assuage her grief Martha begins redecorating the country home. She pulls up the carpets, paints, and clears out all the clutter. As part of this process she

encounters boxes of photographs in the attic. Martha's grief is still too fresh to go through these material remains of Ash's family at this point. Like the picture which she initially keeps on the mantel, Martha cannot bear to paint over a section of wall that tracks Ash's growth as a child. They are reminders of Living Ash, charged with Martha's memories of him and their time together, but compounded by loss and grief. The photo and the pencil-mark indicators of Living Ash's genuine history, both revisited later in the episode, depict the Gothic and spectral implications through the concepts of presence and absence and material/informational binaries. They suggest Living Ash's past physicality and the current immaterial, emotional remembrance of him. As a guiding definition, Chris Baldick (2009, p. xix) identifies a problematic inheritance of time in an intimate domestic setting as a key element of the gothic effect. Martha's inheritance of Ash's family home includes multiple histories of loss as well as material reminders of grief. These are the ideal conditions for a ghost story.

Following Townshend's assertion that mourning is 'the fundamental obligation in Gothic writing' (2008, p. 75), like the traditional ghost story, networked spectrality is intimately related to the grieving process and gothic inheritances. As Martha's friend, Sara (Sinead Matthews), insensitively mentions, 'it wouldn't work' if Ash was not dead. In an important scene, Sara and Martha discuss a digital service, in beta development, that can supposedly help with her bereavement:

SARA: You click the link and you talk to it [...] You type messages in, like an e-mail, and then it talks back to you, just like he would.

MARTHA: He's dead!

SARA: It's software. It mimics him. You give it someone's name. It goes back and reads through all the things they've ever said online, their Facebook updates, their tweets, anything public. I just gave it Ash's name, the system did the rest [...]. Just say hello to it. If you like it, you then give it access to his private e-mails. The more it has, the more it's him.

MARTHA: It won't be him.

SARA: No. It's not. But it helps.

Sara's claim that the software mimics a user based on their digital contributions online helps anchor the terms to describe the database that eventually gets embodied in the likeness of Living Ash. It also foregrounds the fact that Database Ash is not Ash, but is also not entirely not him either.

Although Martha is initially disgusted by Sara's 'obscene' suggestion, she eventually caves in to her grief. What ultimately pushes Martha over the uncanny threshold, that she recognises as horrific and unnatural, is when she realises that she is pregnant with Ash's child. Between the poles of humour, comfort and the uncanny, the episode frequently and explicitly draws attention to the increasingly 'creepy' steps Martha wilfully takes in her choice to embody Database Ash.

Exchanging messages quickly gives way to speaking on the phone:

MARTHA: ... You sound just like him.

ASH: Almost *creepy* isn't it? I say creepy, I mean, it's totally batshit crazy that I can even talk to you. I mean, I don't even have a mouth.

MARTHA: That's just the sort of thing he would say.

ASH: Well. That's why I said it.

In this scene, the impossibility of communicating with the dead and any fear or experience of the uncanny is 'almost' creepy. But the dread of the experience is dispelled by Database Ash's tonal delivery of the word 'creepy', expressed with an emphasis that leads into the comparatively light delivery of the 'batshit crazy' line. The fact that this software database has an independent agency but is not the living Ash is constructed not as uncanny, but as funny and even reassuring to Martha. When Ash expresses his lack of a mouth, Martha receives the delivery as comforting rather than creepy, because it is 'just the sort of thing he would say'.

Read in terms of networked spectrality, Ash is dead and the resulting ghost depends on the logic of digital networks. With Ash's name, 'the system' does the rest. This anonymous system constructs an interactive digital ghost from Living Ash's virtual remains. But this networked spectre is not static; it blurs public and private contexts in a terrifying sort of inverted consumption: 'the more it has, the more it's him'. The result is a collapsing of the present-absent, material informational context that is simultaneously not the material Ash, and more like the virtual, and thereby spectral, Ash. Such a ghost has profound implications for Martha's grieving process, and even before she chooses to embody the spectral Database Ash, the systemic, haunting implications in her life are evident: it won't be him, but .... The spectral mechanics surrounding Database Ash exemplify an expanding trope of new media hauntings: the spectral nature of algorithms and the carefully guarded (as trade secrets) digital processes that enable much of the app- and cloud-based services of the contemporary new media ecology. The unknown workings of a technology, an experimental technology or one in an early stage of development, and a glitching or

malfunctioning piece of soft or hardware are gothic and science fiction tropes being carried over as themes of new media hauntings.

'Be Right Back' foregrounds the uncanny resolution that sees Database Ash as a systemic source of haunting in Martha and her daughter's life throughout the episode, which becomes even more poignant because of Martha's involvement and constant reminders of how creepy the process is. A sub-theme of the episode is the ease of use, comfort and immersive qualities of digital technologies through which Martha becomes dependent, even addicted, to the 'help' Database Ash provides in her mourning process. Martha is complicit in her own haunting at every possible turn. In such a way, Martha's mourning process is irrevocably, gothically, polluted. At the episode's climax, Martha finally understands that the comparatively static (re)construction of Embodied Ash is endangering her memories of Living Ash. At the heart of her growing discomfort with Embodied Ash has been a thematic concern of the entire episode: all social interaction and self-presentation is contextual, and constantly being negotiated, but this process is complicated by mediated persistence and death.

*In The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman (1971)

conceptualises social interaction using drama metaphors to explain the negotiation of public facing, front-stage performances, compared to backstage privacy.

Goffman's concepts of face, face-work, and impression management are often linked with symbolic interactionism, the sociological perspective that situates aspects of identity and self as constructed through constant spoken social interactions.

Accordingly, co-present communication depends on an active negotiation of context-dependent mutual social cues. But in mediated non-co-present communication, this

framework breaks down as identifiable contexts collapse into infinite possible scenarios challenging the 'correct' navigation. In 'Be Right Back', it is Martha, not Ash, who experiences this collapsing of context. Ash, like Sam in *Ghost*, is the context that collapses, in addition to the depiction of death as the ultimate context collapse for mediated remains.

Social navigation and impression management occur in co-present conversation too, although it is much more problematic online. At the beginning of the episode Ash is happy enough to sing along with Martha to 'If I Can't Have You', but 'draws the line at disco', switching the radio off as Heatwave's (1977) 'Boogie Nights' comes on. This prompts an otherwise forgettable argument in which Ash declares, much to Martha's wonder, that everyone likes the Bee Gees:

ASH: Nah, the Bee Gees wrote that, everybody likes the Bee Gees.

MARTHA: You don't.

ASH: I do.

MARTHA: Ten years! You haven't played them once.

ASH: Have you heard of headphones?

MARTHA: Come on then, what's your favourite Bee Gees track?

ASH: 'How Deep is Your Love'.

MARTHA: You do not like 'How Deep is Your Love'.

ASH: It's perfectly natural, there's nothing wrong with it.

MARTHA: It's just... it's not very you.

Ash then tauntingly launches into the opening bars prompting Martha to jokingly threaten to crash the van.

The exchange highlights the divide between Ash's authentic self that loves the Bee Gees – 'I do' – and Martha's perception of Ash: 'It's just – not very you'. Specific signifiers of Living Ash get fed back through the collapse of the living/dead/mediated remains context to show the extent that Embodied Ash is 'not enough' of the authentic Ash of Martha's memories. Variations on the theme of the context collapse in mediated social exchanges are plentiful in the episode. Considering similar exchanges between Oda Mae and Molly about the material and emotionally significant aspects of Sam, especially Sam's phrase 'ditto', cements context collapse as an important theme of new media hauntings.

Embodied Ash initially struggles with presenting the correct 'face' in social situations because he/it is not solely a collection of Living Ash's digital presence. He/It also has active in/output sensory awareness and interfaces in real-time with digital networks that allow him/it to search information, like the specifics of those who have jumped off the emotionally significant Lovers' Leap, for example. The shortcomings of Embodied Ash's limited contextual social awareness are the start of Martha's realisation of the extent of her choices. In a few significant scenes, Embodied Ash does not respond like a human being let alone like Ash. For example, Embodied Ash does not need to eat or sleep (although he/it kindly offers to chew and swallow if it helps him/it appear more human). He/It is aware of the indignity of waking up naked, but does not need to breathe. Similarly, his/its sexual responses come defaulted to pornographic movies which lead, initially, to a more fulfilling experience for Martha, but are void of any awareness of the emotional significance also available in a sexual encounter, as evident when Martha is angry and his response is to allay the conflict with intercourse.



Inverting the episode's repeated warnings to Martha about the uncanny situation she is fostering, it is Martha's effort to negotiate the present/absence, material/informational context collapse of Embodied Ash that suggests the biotechnical entity's social progress. When Martha takes Embodied Ash to the famed Lovers' Leap (with its own emotional significance in both Martha and Ash's relationship, and her emotional remembrance) and orders him/it to jump to his/its death, it initiates a highly complex scene that documents Embodied Ash's social progress. The scene begins with Embodied Ash jokingly shouting 'NOOOOO! Don't do it!'. This begins an exchange with Martha that gets progressively more difficult for Embodied Ash to compute and navigate.

MARTHA: See, he would have worked out what was going on. This wouldn't have ever ever happened, but if it had, he would have worked it out.

ASH: Sorry, hang on. That's a very difficult sentence to process.

When Martha directs Embodied Ash to jump, his/its response is framed within the protocols of his/its embodied software: 'What? Over there? I never express suicidal thoughts or self harm...'. Where Embodied Ash draws on his/its default protocols, Martha is attempting to express the effects of many layers of context collapse: 'Yeah, well you aren't you, are you?' Martha's turn of phrase confuses Embodied Ash once again: 'That's another difficult one, to be honest'. Martha's response is her most articulate account of the layers of context collapse she is beginning to understand that she has brought upon herself: 'You're just a few ripples of you. There is no history to you. You're just a performance of stuff that he performed without thinking, and it's not enough!' It is especially telling that in this scene Martha still addresses Embodied Ash as 'you' highlighting the lack of a social and linguistic means

to differentiate this version of Ash who is so drastically similar to, and different from, the Living Ash – the 'him' of her memories.

At this point Martha asserts that the real Ash would not have simply jumped, but would be scared, pleading for life. Embodied Ash does just that, suggesting a breakthrough in his/its conscious social interaction. In a chorus of Embodied Ash repeating the phrase 'I don't want to die, please don't make me do it', and Martha's own repetition of the phrase 'no, it's not fair, that's not fair', Martha does not expect this change of behaviour. As a final realisation of the scope of her actions and their profound implications, Martha screams her frustration from the cliff top.

Embodied Ash is uncannily at odds with how Martha remembers (and wants to remember) Ash, but also how she constructed him in their social interactions. This contributes to a radical context collapse but also constructs Ash as an example of the transition from the singular, traditional ghost to the multiple ghost(s) of new media hauntings. Martha's choice to reconstruct Ash based on his social media use results in multiple, enduring, uncanny versions of Ash. The complexities of symbolic interactionism in mediated communication are not solely enough to exemplify the theme of multiplicity in networked spectrality. But with Ash's death, the context of the Living Ash's social utterances begin to collapse and become expressible in spectral terms. The episode takes these conceits further by playing out multiple levels of context collapse around the living/dead, present/absent, and material/informational binaries.

Martha broaches the uncanny digital threshold when she realises she is pregnant with Ash's child. She communicates to a database assemblage of the deceased father of her unborn child. Dead, Ash is a spectral presence, only

immaterially present (the memory of Ash), but he is also absently present in the collected agency of his online utterances. Still more multiply spectral, he is absently present in the genetic make-up of his unborn child. The implications of multiplicity simultaneously point to a spectral presence and genuine absence in both Ash and the unborn child. These aspects of multiplicity reverberate with networked spectrality because the spectral mechanics depend on the past (Ash's death), influence the present (Martha's emotional state and pregnancy), and impact the future (Martha and her daughter, and even Embodied Ash who is allowed special visitation in his/its exile in the attic), but are inseparably linked with the persistent, replicable scale of the affordances of networked new media technologies.

Another layer of multiplicity suggesting the systemic scope of Brooker's imagining of the overlap between technology and death is reinforced when Martha accidentally breaks her mobile phone, which she uses to stay in near constant contact with Database Ash prior to embodying him/it. In this way, despite not being physically present in much of the episode, Ash is as much a hyperpresence in the narrative as Sam is in *Ghost*, but is a mediated, informational presence. Database Ash is so present to Martha that dropping her phone causes a fresh experience of grief. Distraught, she quickly charges a new phone, and frantically awaits Database Ash's call during which he/it says: 'I'm not in that thing you know, I'm remote. I'm in the cloud. You don't have to worry about breaking me.... I'm not going anywhere'. Although Martha has replaced her material mobile phone, the new phone readily provides access to the immaterial database. The fact that Ash is dead while there is a spectral, 'remote', digital database 'in the cloud' mimicking and allowing a pseudo-continuance in Martha's life, goes a long way in introducing the emphasis on

multiplicity and technical persistence in networked spectrality. The scene also indicates the systemic scope of such persistence. Martha mistakenly associates Database Ash as 'fragile', but it is not the steadfast database that is damaged, or even contained in the phone. As a digital entity 'in the cloud', Database Ash is persistent, replicable and scalable.

Database Ash's ready availability on a new phone suggests another layer of multiplicity. If there were a problem with the Embodied Ash's biotechnical body, a fresh blank body could be activated and installed with Database Ash's subjectivity. The technological transfer of subjectivity, uploading or downloading one's consciousness into a new or enhanced body, and a general concern with the agency and personhood of clones, are all established themes in science fiction. The point at which androids stylised as humans become problematically 'too human' is expressed by Minator et al. as the 'uncanny valley' (2004) a theme with implications for the gothic and science fiction alike. While the tone of the episode remains consistently and deeply personal, any blank biotechnical body could assume the qualities of Ash, therefore making multiple Embodied Ashes, and suggesting the themes of multiplicity doubly because any blank body could also become any number of other digital consciousnesses, possibly all at the same time. In a networked spectrality reading, these concerns are approached as a type of enduring haunting.

Although 'Be Right Back' resembles the personal haunting of a traditional ghost story, the implications of these multiple iterations of Ash, and multiple layers of haunting, serve to profoundly confound Martha's grief. The fact that Embodied Ash remains in Martha and her daughter's lives, albeit in exile in the attic, also indicates the systemic nature of networked spectrality, rather than the restorative

resolution of the traditional ghost story. Database and Embodied Ash's spectral conditions are rooted in the digital and, as such, are not governed by an illogical logic that, if the specific spectral conditions were met, would see the haunting resolved. Instead, Embodied Ash remains a source of profound uncanny haunting in Martha's life, and suggests entirely new complexities in how her daughter relates to the memory of Living Ash, and the hyper-presence of Embodied Ash. Although their relationship is not depicted, it is suggested that the daughter does not have the same haunted relationship with Embodied Ash as her mother. But the claim stands that the daughter and Embodied Ash's relationship is fundamentally different because of the multiple layers that separate them both from Living Ash.

'Be Right Back' is a contemporary gothic expression of the fears surrounding the unknown and unknowable experience of death, mixed with anxieties about the unknown and uncertain effects of technological advancement. Brooker depicts a future in which there is no easy or readily accessible 'off' button. As an allegory for contemporary media use, this episode invites viewers to reflect on their own contributions to social media networks, and how death might complicate them: what form will your enduring digital presence take? What will it say about how you lived, and what will it say about you when you are gone? Martha has to live with her choices in a multiple continuum of haunting. Reflected through Brooker's *Black Mirror*, 'Be Right Back' offers a dark meditation on new media technologies encountering death.

### **Multiple Continuums of Grief: Networked Spectrality and Enduring New Media Hauntings**

Where traditional ghost stories usually resolve according to their own specific spectral conditions, when ghosts assume the qualities of new media technologies, they are multiple, enduring, and have systemic ramifications. My networked spectrality reading complicates what is meant in *Ghost* to be a moment of catharsis between the spectral Sam and Molly at the film's conclusion. Molly's process of belief ends with the affirmation in no uncertain terms of Sam's love for her, even experiencing his unique touch once again. While the scene could be read as Sam finally able to commit himself to Molly (as Badley reads it and Rubin intends it in the script) it also represents a fresh experience of grief for Molly as she must endure Sam's definitive loss again, while also confounding her grief with the assurance of Sam waiting for her in heaven.

Among Sam's last words to Molly in this moment of supposed catharsis are: 'See ya' to which Molly lovingly replies, 'See ya' suggesting the pair will meet again in the heavenly hereafter and affirming an afterlife of reunion. These words should be a comfort, but they also indicate a new iteration of Sam as a present absence. How is Molly to overcome her grief with the knowledge that pending a 'good' life, Sam awaits her in heaven? After fighting to accept Sam's absence through the narrative of the film, she is now confronted with that absence all over again. Viewed in this way, at the end of the film Molly could be considered haunted by Sam's absence. He remains hyper-present in his absence, threatening to freeze Molly into a permanent state of melancholy (akin to her grief at Sam's death the first time). Or, as I read it, an enduring experience of, not a singular occurrence of haunting, but a haunting across

multiple continuums of grief. All the mementos and memories of Molly and Sam in the past become coloured not just by Sam's death, but by this second expression of grief and the certainty of his presence in heaven. These complex spectral mechanics structure all beliefs in an afterlife of reunion.

In the film, allowing Sam and Molly a final earthly reunion is possible because of the dramatic conceit that enables the film's visual depiction of Sam's presence and implied absence. Although Patrick Swayze is physically present throughout most of the film as Ghost Sam, the moments in the narrative when he is meant to be the most stereotypically ghostly, Swayze is not shown. But here, enriched with special effects, the semi-corporeal, semi-ghostly Sam can interact with Molly, unmediated by Oda Mae. To maximise the intended sentimental resolution, the scene mostly focuses on Molly and Sam, but it also features Oda Mae, who gently reminds Sam that 'they are waiting' for him. In such a way Sam has emotional good-byes with Molly and Oda Mae, indicating the prevailing sentimental, happy ending.

I had no specific cause to question the prevailing sentimental conclusion until I saw a production of *Ghost: The Musical* (2011). The musical iteration of *Ghost* is also scripted by Rubin, with music and lyrics by Dave Stewart and Glen Ballard. It premiered at the Manchester Opera House, Manchester, England in March 2011, where I saw it on 5 May 2011. The production was billed as an over-the-top adaptation and in addition to the big musical names and the Matthew Warchus' Tony Award-winning direction, much was made of the onstage optical illusions that would represent the spectral for the viewing audience, designed by Paul Kieve. *Ghost: The Musical* replicated the success of the film, receiving Tony Award and

Laurence Olivier Award nominations, and touring Manchester, London, Broadway and a UK National Tour until 2014.

The musical utilises a similar dramatic conceit as the film, in which Sam (performed by Richard Fleeshman) is physically present on stage for nearly the entire production. Oda Mae (Sharon D. Clarke) still acts as medium to Sam throughout the performance, but her role in the final scene in the musical is diminished so Sam and Molly (Caissie Levy) can perform the closing number, 'The Love Inside'. Like the film, the conclusion features a final illusion where, through theatrical smoke and mirrors Sam disappears from the physical stage and 'ascends' to heaven as a light motif. As one of the more spectacular illusions in the production, it marks a final dramatic moment in what is otherwise an emotional scene. To accomplish the illusion and give time for Sam to leave the stage, Molly is prominently lit in spotlight as the rest of the stage goes dark. This moment of absolute isolation on stage, and the expression on Levy's face are what I most remember about the production. This conclusion appears to have been reworked in subsequent productions, with some featuring Oda Mae more prominently, as in the film, and some changing the lighting schemes and the visual effects of Sam's ascent to heaven so that the Molly character does not appear so isolated. The dominant reading of the conclusion to *Ghost: The Musical* is not meant to be suggestive of Molly's renewed and suggestively enduring melancholy but it is a by-product of the spectral mechanics of the narrative which emphasize the relationship between mediation and haunting. In its portrayal of similar spectral mechanics related to mediation, 'Be Right Back' also concludes with a focus on Martha's emotional isolation and enduring haunting.



In its final sequence, 'Be Right Back' lingers over the systemic extent to which Martha is haunted by Embodied Ash. It charts the gothic continuum of haunting and grief that includes the loss of Living Ash, but also Martha's complicity in the haunting whereby an uncanny version of Ash continues to exist in her and her daughter's present. As Martha unfolds the ladder to the attic in the background, the shot focuses on the unpainted-over pencil marks from Ash's youth. The focus shifts to Martha who hesitates before ascending at her daughter's urging. The camera lingers on Martha's expression, a chilling visual, before jumping to a medium, then to a long shot, and finally jumping to black.

The effect of these jump cuts reinforces the scope of haunting as systemic: it permeates the whole house, the whole episode, and even opens into the viewer's watching space as it cuts to the blackness of the viewer's reflection in the now dark viewing device. Removing visual mementos of the dead to the attic has already been established as a means of dealing with grief in the episode. But for Martha, the mementos of Ash are forever coloured by her choice to embody his virtual remains. The final scene draws her memory of the authentic, Living Ash, into contrast with the embodied performance (see *Figure 3.3*). Martha has not properly mourned Ash and the Embodied Ash remains a continuous reminder of her loss, with each encounter opening that grief and regret afresh.



*Figure 3.3 Martha (Hayley Atwell) steeling herself before visiting Embodied Ash on her daughter's birthday ('Be Right Back', 2013).*

Housing a database in a biotechnical body that nearly perfectly resembles a human is currently a fiction; however, there are already fully digitised databases that populate everyday social and technical experiences in lived social reality. Belief in an afterlife of reunion also remains prominent in followers of the Christian faith, and is widespread beyond it even as secular values challenge the popularity of religious values in contemporary social life. Considering that networked information can be accessed with increasing disregard to physical locations, pulled from the cloud, or accessed via a mobile device, it is increasingly common to continue posting to the Facebook page of a dead friend. Or to attend a funeral in a multiplayer online game for an acquaintance never met face to face; or track the last days of a celebrity dying of an illness through posts on their personal blog.

Networked spectrality offers a tool-kit to consider the implications of mediated remains and technical persistence in a contemporary society that tends to identify and articulate such encounters as spectral. Together, *Ghost* and 'Be Right Back' question the implications of the widespread afterlives and increasing visibility of the digital dead and addresses intentional and unintentional participation with virtual remains that are deeply imprinted with 'authentic' identifiable signifiers of self. New media technologies increase the points of contact with the digital dead, opening users to new experiences of grief and context collapse. The persistence and vast circulation of virtual remains are changing established patterns of grief, threatening to turn any mediated experience of grief into one of systemic and enduring haunting.

## **Chapter Four – Haunting as Lived Social Experience: The Spectral Digital Aesthetics of Slender Man and Anonymous**

In the previous chapter I argue that the depictions of grief in *Ghost* (1990) and the 'Be Right Back' episode of *Black Mirror* (2013) are personal, social contexts of new media hauntings and networked spectrality, prone to collapse into multiple continuums of haunting when mediated remains persist. My focus in this chapter expands the social context from the personal to the communal. My analysis draws on two distinct social phenomena: the Slender Man Internet horror meme, and the collective of activists and hackers operating as 'Anonymous'. I will argue that through the cultivation of a digital aesthetic of haunting, the Slender Man and Anonymous internet communities establish a participatory, transmedia social experience as an important aspect of networked spectrality. A key distinguishing factor between previous chapters and my case studies of Slender Man and Anonymous is a shift from cultural products that depict the theme of haunting to the theme of haunting being expressed as an aspect of lived social experience. I contend that viral distribution, broad and participatory storytelling, remixing of content specifically produced to frighten, and conceptions of haunting that utilise the nuances of digital media, are fluidly engaged through new media use.

As two case studies, I will read Slender Man and Anonymous as multiple, nodular, participatory and enduring examples of socio-cultural products linked to communities that evoke a digital aesthetic of haunting for specific ends. The Slender Man community enjoys collective creativity and sharing frightening content, while Anonymous use a digital aesthetics of haunting in their public relation videos to cause fear, garner attention and promote political action. Reading Slender Man and

Anonymous through networked spectrality helps bridge the gap between the portrayal of new media hauntings in film and television and themes of haunting expressed as aspects of lived social experience. This represents a change in flow for networked spectrality from content specifically produced in the register of haunting (by a producer, production company, production designer, director), to communities organically generating and refining themes of haunting for other likeminded contributors, participants and audiences. As examples of networked spectrality, Slender Man and Anonymous indicate the intentional blurring of the on and offline divide.

My interest in how Slender Man and Anonymous can be considered examples of networked spectrality is two-fold. I am interested in how their transmedia aesthetic choices express the theme of digital haunting, and the coherence of social conventions around the convergence of new media technologies and conceptions of spectrality. As I have argued generally in this thesis, ghost stories are highly formulaic. Contemporary depiction of new media hauntings also adhere to a digital aesthetic of haunting that incorporates digital technologies and traditional conceptions of haunting. In this chapter, I show how both Slender Man and Anonymous have adopted aesthetic elements from film and television in the specific register of haunting, and consider the cultural implications of their respective digital aesthetics of haunting. To help support such claims, I draw on Marc Olivier's (2015) observations of contemporary 'Glitch Gothic' and glitch aesthetics, detailed in the introduction.

Slender Man and Anonymous are notorious popular culture icons among twenty-first century new media aficionados. Before their relative notoriety, however,

both can be traced to specific communities centred around niche web forums.

Anonymous can be traced back to 4chan as early as 2004 while Slender Man began on the Something Awful forums in 2009. Although Anonymous formed several years earlier than Slender Man, I consider Slender Man as the first case study in this chapter because it is more readily identifiable as a cultural product in the register of haunting. Thus, Slender Man provides a structure to consider the evolution of Anonymous' digital aesthetic of haunting.

### **Beware the Slender Man**

As I was walking home one night  
I saw a stranger by a light  
His arms were long, his head was small  
I've never seen a man so tall  
His arms reached out and grabbed me tight  
I went along without a fight  
I looked and saw he had no face  
And then my heart began to race  
He spoke to me without a sound  
And picked me up right off the ground  
The Slender Man took me away  
To never see new light of day

(‘The Slender Man’s Nursey Rhyme’, Ad\_Hominem\_Phallusy)

Slender Man (also Slenderman), also known as Der Großmann (The Great Man), Der Ritter (The Knight), The Operator, The Administrator, The Tall Man, The Thin Man, Daddy LongLegs, Mr. Slim, Mr. Thin, Slendy, or, simply, Slender, is a fictional supernatural character created by Eric Knudsen in 2009 on a paranormal photo generation thread on the website SomethingAwful.com (‘Slender Man’, 2007-2017). Slender Man was first created and circulated on the internet and his relationship with new media technologies make him a twenty-first century

bogeyman. Slender's features, supernatural abilities and motives are only ever hinted at, providing a source of continuing fear, interest, and exchange.

At first glimpse Slender appears to be a well-dressed, slightly anachronistic-looking man in the background of antique photos. He is far from an unassuming bystander, however, and the more one looks at him, the more uncanny elements one notices: his featureless face, unnatural height, disjointed and irregularly proportioned limbs, and even tentacles of various number, size, and length (see *Figure 4.1*).



*Figure 4.1 Slender as Big Daddy (Rodfer, 2013).*

Slender is frequently depicted in forest settings. He can teleport and stretch his limbs and tentacles. He operates in the margins of culture and haunts the divide between the mediated and the real. He is intimately related to media technologies new and old, but also disrupts them. Slender's haunting, maddening, present absence is signalled by distorting media: static, noise, unnatural silence, analogue and digital glitches and feedback. Slender's motives are unknown but many of his victims are children and young adults who become obsessed and driven mad by him. Many fall victim to what is known as Slender Sickness – depression, insomnia, coughing fits, nose bleeds, obsessive compulsions – and end up missing, presumed dead.

Slender Man is one of the most successful examples of 'creepypasta' fiction, a term derived from the Internet shorthand, 'copypasta', referring to the practice of copying and pasting material across various discussion boards multiple times. Death, haunting and suicide are common creepypasta themes. Because of the way these stories circulate on the Internet, creepypasta fictions have similar characteristics to urban legends which are principally exchanged (and exaggerated) by word of mouth. But the locus of creepypasta changes this dynamic to include photos, books, film or television programmes, video games, or videos posted on new media channels like YouTube.

What began as an exchange among a niche web forum has grown into a social phenomenon with stories and fan art that continue to circulate on the Internet and elsewhere, several cult YouTube series, some Hollywood film iterations, survival horror and virtual reality video games, numerous references in popular culture, and even derivative memes and parodies. Slender Man has also sparked a moral panic.



The fiction proved to be so immersive and so widely spread that there have been instances of people setting fire to their homes, endangering family or friends, even attempting murder in Slender Man's name and to prove his existence. The most high-profile case to date occurred in May 2014 when two Wisconsin children, aged twelve, stabbed a friend nineteen times and left her for dead on the outskirts of a forest (Gabler, 2014).

Scholars have taken an interest in the crowdsourced origins of Slender Man and how he represents the intersection between longstanding folklore traditions and legend cycles, and the affordances of new media networked publics. Tina Marie Boyer (2013) has investigated the storytelling and myth-making qualities surrounding Slender's origins and development. Shira Chess and Eric Newsom (2015) also delve into the mix of folkloric traditions and Internet affordances that produce what they call the 'Internet mythology' of the Slender Man. Andrew Peck (2015) considers what Slender Man does in relation to media use and consumption. I also discuss Slender along this axis, specifically the solidification of his digital aesthetic of haunting around generic horror tropes, and their ramifications as a social context to networked spectrality.

### **Origins of Slender: Crowdsourcing Horror Aesthetics**

In the following discussion of the collective refining of the aesthetics of Slender Man, I am informed by Shira Chess (2012; 2015) and Andrew Peck (2015) who have compiled a comprehensive background for Slender from the various forums and numerous iterations of the Slender Man mythos. Before one can begin to explain the Slender Man phenomenon, one must first understand the structure of

the Something Awful forums. The Something Awful forums are an important social context of the Slender Man phenomenon because the contributors constitute the first community to produce the version of Slender that would eventually be circulated more widely.

The forums section of the SomethingAwful.com website specifically provides members a space to post, share, and engage in discussions and collaborations across any number of topics. As with forums of this kind on the Internet like 4Chan, social exchanges can tend toward aggressive or anti-social behaviours known in Internet parlance as 'trolling' or 'griefing'. While this type of behaviour is a cherished quality, even a community-building characteristic on many forums including Something Awful, the Something Awful community also prides itself on being a troll-free forum. The forum rules clarify the line between what is acceptable and what is not:

We here on Something Awful Forums are very elitist and strict assholes. We pride ourselves on running one of the most entertaining and troll-free forums on the Internet. This is accomplished by charging a \$10 fee to filter out folks not serious about adhering to the rules, and banning those who manage to slip through and break them. We are very serious about keeping our forums clean and troll-free, so please consider your account an investment and treat it accordingly. (quoted in Chess, 2012, p. 376)

As the name implies, the Something Awful forums are made up of a community, affectionately known to one another as 'goons', who relish the inappropriate, the off colour and the awful. The forum community is very active and frequently collaborate on creative endeavours including the well-known 'Photoshop Phriday' feature. An example of the type of threads the community generates is 'Jerk Superheroes'

(2011). Members posted pictures depicting superheroes being less than heroic, like the Batmobile taking up several disabled parking spaces. As part of the ‘culture of image manipulation’ (Chess, 2012, p. 377), Something Awful community members routinely post challenges for one another and it was just such a ‘Create Paranormal Images’ challenge that signalled the beginning of Slender Man.

On June 10, 2009, the first images of Slender Man were posted by user ‘Victor Surge’. It was later revealed that ‘Victor Surge’ was the user name of Eric Knudsen, an aspiring schoolteacher and family man in his mid-thirties. The first two images of Slender Man were Slender with several children (see *Figure 4.2*) and Slender and the slide (see *Figure 4.3*). Each was accompanied with a vague caption:



*Figure 4.2 The first image of the Slender Man posted on a 'Create Paranormal Images' thread of the somethingawful.com forum ('Slender Man', 2007-2017).*

' "We didn't want to go, we didn't want to kill them, but its persistent silence and outstretched arms horrified and comforted us at the same time..." –

1983, photographer unknown, presumed dead.'



*Figure 4.3 The second image of Slender Man features his tentacles and the caption provides his name ('Slender Man', 2007-2017).*

'One of two recovered photographs from the Stirling City Library blaze. Notable for being taken the day which fourteen children vanished and for what is referred to as 'The Slender Man'. Deformities cited as film defects by officials. Fire at library occurred one week later. Actual photograph confiscated as evidence. – 1986, photographer: Mary Thomas, missing since June 13th, 1986.'

Within days, posts about Slender Man dominated the forum as likeminded users contributed images and content about the character. Forum users intuited that the Slender Man character was available for discussion, participation, and the generation of new images and stories, and so the gradual process of refining the character began. 'The forum became, in part', Chess observes, 'a kind of community storytelling and, at the same time, a method of negotiating and fine-tuning the nuances of the horror genre' (Chess, 2012, p. 380). As a 'crowd-sourced monster' (Peck, 2015, p. 334), the Something Awful forum community set about negotiating the specific characteristics of the Slender Man. In short, the community set about defining Slender Man's aesthetic.

The members posting on the forum about Slender contributed in a variety of ways according to their own sense of horror aesthetics. As Peck finds,

Slender Man drew upon an existing matrix of belief that included mass media representations of paranormal creatures, the user's personal experiences and fears, and the influence of previous posts on the discussion thread. In other words, the Slender Man was not an entirely new creation and was instead influenced by a vast network of vernacular and institutional performances that had directly and indirectly preceded it. (2015, p. 339)

The matrix of mass media representations of paranormal characters, personal experience and fears, and vernacular appropriation were a topic of frequent discussion on the forum and part of the communal negotiations about Slender Man's

aesthetic. Forum users discussed, argued, and guided contributions toward the aesthetic gradually being sanctioned by the community<sup>7</sup>:

**Pumpkin Spoon:** The only flaw is the conflicting images we get occasionally, I don't know that the more spider-like images work for him, same for when he's out in the open. I was thinking of him seeming fairly human at a glance, with the tentacles and facelessness not apparent until you really look. Although the inhuman height and sort of "stretched" look are pretty consistent. love it!

**Trenchmaul:** I'm not really digging these folklore backstories though.

**Nurse Fanny:** I think a more modern thing would be best. You know like kids start disappearing in the 50's. More contemporary with less of a back story or explanation. I dunno it seems creepier if he just shows up out of no where.

**Bluedeanie:** All of the Slender man stuff is good, though I think these [images] are the best. They seem more plausible. I also like the stories that accompany the first set of pics more-so than the other image 'storytelling' used in the other ones, but that's just me. Either way, keep up the good work.

**Thoreau-up:** I think the Slender man's tentacles need to be a little less obvious. It seems a lot less freakier if you can see them so clearly.

**WoodrowSkillson:** I agree, its better when you don't notice them at first, and only later you realize just how alien the Sender man is.

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<sup>7</sup> The culture of the somethingawful.com forums and the 4chan communities where Anonymous began can be both cavalier and defensive about their punctuation, spelling, and grammar. I have not indicated the mistakes in quotations in this chapter with the [*sic*] to more accurately reflect the social practices of these communities. My rationale behind this is two-fold, the mistakes occur at a frequency that including the [*sic*] would disrupt the content, and in some cases the commenters *meant* to make the errors. An in-depth discussion of these social practices fall outside of the scope of this thesis. I draw on these quotations from Peck (2015) because I do not have member status sufficient to access all the unedited achieves where these threads are kept. Additionally, active users can edit their old posts, so the thread has undergone some changes. On this point, the page hosting is not always stable. At various times, I have found it inaccessible. At the time of submission (31 October 2017), the database is accessible at <https://forums.somethingawful.com/showthread.php?threadid=3150591&userid=0&perpage=40&pagenumber=3>.

**Mooseyfate:** The Slender man should appear in seemingly innocent pictures (bright colors, happy people, etc.) somewhere in the background for realism. (quoted in Peck, p. 342)

This small snap-shot of the sort of community participation and shaping of Slender's aesthetic demonstrate the range of involvement and the type of characteristics people were most passionate about. Users were negotiating Slender's appearance, his supernatural powers, his backstory, reaching an organic consensus. As a product of a collaborative creative culture, Slender was understood as a shared public resource. An awareness of his non-canonical, communal generation was also a topic of discussion amongst the Something Awful thread:

I'm loving the Slenderman. That's just an awesome name to start with. The minimal backstory to the image was just perfect. Victor, you have a gift for horror it seems.

You posted one image and a tiny backstory. Planting a small seed of an idea into the internet, without even knowing (or planning) for others to run with it, and make it grow.

Then, people saw your idea, and started expanding on it. The Slenderman went from an isolated incident to a full mythos, with woodcuttings, incident reports, coverups and multiple killings to its name in just a few pages of collaborative effort.

...

What I'm trying to say with both of these, is that I am continually amazed with how a single idea on the internet can sprout and grow into something more incredible than you ever expected, simply through a small amount of creative effort on the part of many individuals. I won't be getting to sleep anytime soon thanks to you all. (Moto42, 2009; quoted in Peck, 2015, p. 344)

Several key aesthetic tropes of the horror genre are being negotiated in these exchanges: vaguely human features, a preference toward ambiguity rather than overt horror, the presence and visibility of the supernatural including the tentacles, and perhaps the most important trait, plausibility. Slender's apparent authenticity



and plausibility were crucial factors in the continued communal engagement and spread from the Something Awful forum around the Internet. In the contributors' appropriation and navigation of aesthetics from across the mediascape, which includes literary, cult and popular horror films and television, and survival horror games references, Slender was also understood to be part and product of those references. Chess understands Slender and the wider mythos as 'adjacent to and constantly in response to mainstream media' (2012, p. 383).

In a self-described effort to preserve the mystique of the character, Knudsen takes a mostly stand-offish approach to discussing Slender Man. He has nevertheless given a few interviews:

'The Slender Man as an idea was made-up off the top of my head, although the concept is based on a number of things that scare me. The name I thought up on the fly when I wrote the first bit. The asset I used for a couple of the pictures was the creepy tall guy from Phantasm, which sadly I have not seen, and the others various guys in suits. All of the things that aren't the torso and legs, like the tentacles and Slender Man's face, were painted from scratch however' (quoted in Peck, 2015, p. 338).

In an interview for knowyourmeme.com, Knudsen expands on more of his specific literary, film, and popular culture references:

I was mostly influenced by H.P Lovecraft, Stephan King (specifically his short stories), the surreal imaginings of William S. Burroughs, and couple games of the survival horror genre; Silent Hill and Resident Evil. I feel the most direct influences were Zack Parsons's "That Insidious Beast", the Steven King short story "The Mist", the SA [Something Awful] tale regarding "The Rake", reports

of so-called shadow people, Mothman, and the Mad Gasser of Mattoon. I used these to formulate something whose motivations can barely be comprehended and causes general unease and terror in a general population.

(‘Victor Surge’, n.d)

Again, a mix of literary, film, video games, and other cult and popular culture references colours Slender’s aesthetic. A template for the horrifying psychological horror aspects of Slender can be seen in H.P. Lovecraft’s fiction where characters rarely encounter the eldritch horror of the Elder Gods directly, but are nevertheless steadily unnerved and driven mad by the supernatural encounters. Similar themes of madness and obsession feed the ‘Slender Sickness’ that develop in Slender’s victims. Slender’s tentacles were also adopted and understood in terms of Lovecraft’s wider mythos. More parallels could be drawn between Knudsen’s cult and popular culture references but two important aspects I want to highlight are the idea that Slender Man is a composite of things that frighten Knudsen personally, and the specific intention to obscure Slender’s motivations to cause maximum terror and unease amongst the general population.

In imparting Slender with his personal fears, Knudsen structured the aesthetic to be read in emotive terms. Slender came to be understood in the community as a monster compiled of numerous personal fears, but smoothed and homogenised according to an aesthetic of ambiguity. The effect is related to Knudsen’s other aim for Slender, maximum impact. At the aesthetic level, Slender was developed to be specifically horrifying and comforting, personal and relatable but alien and other. As Judith Halberstam has observed, gothic monsters combine fragments of otherness into one body (1995). Slender was recognized as a complex amalgam: distinctive but

multiple. While these characteristics ultimately have become bound up in the complexities of artistic integrity, collective creativity and Knudsen's legal copyright, Slender shares the aesthetic of conflating seemingly opposing binaries with traditional and new media hauntings.

### **Slender's Digital Aesthetic of Haunting**

A close analysis of the first Slender Man images and accompanying text (see *Figures 4.2 and 4.3*), informed by my focus on networked spectrality, illustrates the core aesthetic of haunting Knudsen imparted to his creation. In the first caption, the 'we' indicates a collective experience. Numerous children are having a similar experience: the horror cannot be readily attributed to a singular, unreliable narrator. 'We didn't want to go', suggests movement and fluidity both as a trait of Slender and his victims. Wherever the victims have gone, the phrase 'missing' and 'presumed dead' suggest a sovereign elsewhere where victims serve Slender. The child victims suggest shades of the folk story the Pied Piper of Hamelin while the themes of abduction also associate Slender with typical alien abduction narratives.

In Slender Man lore, serving Slender is referred to as being a 'proxy'. Due to the collapsing of the horrifying/comforting binary, being a Slender Man proxy is occasionally coloured as a desirable and distinguished role. The term proxy has two relevant meanings: proximity to, and an agent of Slender Man (with significant parallels to the concept of a digital avatar), and the technical function of a proxy server that backs up, restores, and shares the workload of the primary network server. Here, Slender is referred to as 'it', challenging the linguistic function of the gendered pronouns 'his' or 'her' to establish a social context for this entity. The

inability to distinguish specific information about Slender is a core factor of his aesthetic, the ‘persistent silence and outstretched arms’, horrific and comforting at the same time, establishes the experience as supernatural and uncanny.

The second caption fittingly gestures toward a wider archive of Slender Man material that may have been held at the ‘Stirling City Library’, but it also suggests that there may be more, unnoticed, Slender Man images at other vaguely historical settings and time periods. Slender’s victims, fourteen children, add to his menace and stir fears of protecting the young. Directing viewers to notice Slender’s tentacles, the caption calls attention to the ‘deformities’ but explains them away as ‘film defects’. The focus on the medium of photography, and the idea that defects are rooted in the material conditions of the negative intimately relate Slender and media representation, while also suggesting that he inherently deforms it; Slender appears in media as noise, distortion, glitch.

But in calling attention to the film medium, Knudsen also includes an in-joke for members of the Something Awful forum who are participating in the paranormal photo manipulation thread. The deformities are *not* film defects, but are the result of digital manipulation. The in-joke is continued when it is revealed that this image is a replica, as the ‘actual photograph’ was ‘confiscated as evidence’. This in-joke also speaks to Slender’s relationship to media and the process of remediation and authenticity. The fact that Slender images need to be confiscated or that they act as evidence hints at a more longstanding conspiracy or cover up surrounding Slender taking place off screen. The idea of a collection of Slender Man evidence means he has implicitly been verified by an ‘official’ source. It is also another suggestion that there is more Slender Man material available than has come to light, an aesthetic

that paradoxically adds to his authenticity while inviting the community to participate and generate more Slender content.

Knudsen's captions also include several other fundamental traits of Slender as they relate to the process of mediation and remediation. The photographs are ostensibly old media, from 1983 and 1986 respectively, but are being circulated in the new medium of the Internet, as if these 'real' images are only just now being brought to light and are being shared and remediated on the Internet. The original source of the photograph, however, is unknown or missing – its origins cannot be verified but as a photograph it nevertheless appeals to the longstanding belief that a photograph has an inherent truth value (Barthes, 1978; Sturken and Cartwright, 2003, pp. 16-20). The fact that the authenticity of the image or the content cannot be confirmed is suggestively enduring. The fact that photographer is presumed dead or missing provides nothing definitive, no closure.

When considered more broadly, and including the collative generation and negotiation of Slender Man's aesthetic, some of his core aesthetics are ambiguity, participation, and the blurring of the fictitious and the real divide. Holding a limited copyright on the Slender Man character, Knudsen's images remain the original source material, although the myth of Slender Man has grown to undermine these origins and establish a much longer history. Indeed, Chess and Newsom find that far from an afternoon of Photoshop work exclusively by Surge, 'literally thousands of other amateur writers, filmmakers, and digital artists have contributed to the complex mythos that defines the character' (Chess and Newsom, 2015, p. 4). In this participatory drive to contribute to Slender's greater mythos, users stretched

Slender's origins to a moment before widespread use and understanding of the Internet.

The idea of remediation is a crucial point in Slender's development. As Marc Olivier (2015) comments about the role of remediation in glitch aesthetics, 'remediation gives another opportunity for noise to enter into play, and to compound the problem of deciphering information and error' (p. 266). He continues that a noise-centred analysis reveals 'remediation as a process of resistance to the oversimplified either/or dichotomy of analog [*Sic*] vs. digital media' (Olivier, p. 266). The process of creating Slender Man content, and Slender's aesthetic trait of disrupting media, confound the analogue or digital divide in the register of horror. Slender is not an analogue monster invading digital media, but is a digital monster anachronistically invading fake, old media, and as such, exemplifies the trope of digital noise, glitches, disrupting media *as a specific digital aesthetic of haunting*.

As I established in the introduction, Olivier finds digital noise events and glitch aesthetics 'now constitute essential tropes in the language of cinematic ghost stories' (2015, p. 253). As an aesthetic, Slender inverts Olivier's paradigm of glitch gothic by using new media means to insert himself into old media. Like glitch artists that intentionally manipulate data to cause glitches, people that generate Slender Man content manipulate data to include Slender. Slender's inversion of the glitch gothic aesthetic solidifies remediation as a core aspect of the character's aesthetic development. The theme of remediation frames Slender's complex relationship to technology: aversion, distortion, glitch-aesthetics, but also an undeniable emphasis on alteration, remixing, and using digital tools to make intentionally anachronistic media representations.

One example of Slender's anachronistic remixing media aesthetic is the alteration of Hans Freckenberg's sixteenth-century woodcut, reimagined as 'Der Ritter', an elaborate cover up of Slender's medieval origins. The image was digitally altered according to Slender's digital aesthetic of haunting (see *Figure 4.4*). What is clearly visible as a lance in Freckenberg's wood-cut, is digitally altered to be one of Slender's limbs or tentacles, which he can unnaturally extend. Other limbs or tentacles are visible in 'Der Ritter' but the figure's facial features have been obscured to reflect Slender's characteristic facelessness. Of interest is the fact that the practice of digital alteration and deliberate anachronism obscure Slender's origins. Slender's origins are not just lost to the annals of history but that Slender was both known and the subject of elaborate cover-ups even in the sixteenth century. Whether in supposed woodcuts from the sixteenth century, or still photos from the 1980s, Slender's origins and continued circulation are intimately tied to media and digital remediation.



Figure 4.4 A side by side comparison of Hans Freckenberg's sixteenth-century woodcut and its treatment in the Slenderverse as 'Der Ritter' ('Slender Man, 2007-2017).

### Slender Spreads

In the early days of Slender's creation on Something Awful, the aesthetic of the character was understood in two related contexts: anachronistically haunting 'historical' images, and toeing the line between authenticity and evident fiction. Minutes after the first images of Slender were posted, user 'Beerdeer' coyly requested more: 'As an amateur paranormal investigator, you'd be surprised how much the Slender Man appeared in pictures in times of disaster during that historical period. (AKA I'd like to see more of those)' (quoted in Peck, 2015, p. 339). More than just a call for additional posts from Victor Surge, Beerdeer's remarks were also a green light for other users to also post Slender Man material. From Chess'



observations, ‘other users began to suggest that Slender Man would make a good horror film or book, and began comparing the myths and images to other media objects (primarily films, books, and television shows)’, but ‘the resources to [make a film] were not necessarily immediately available to the forum’s users’ (p. 380). On June 19, 2009, however, user ‘ce gars’ made a post to the forum explaining that his friend, Alex, mysteriously stopped working on his student film and gave him all the footage tapes with the instructions to ‘burn them’ (quoted in Chess, 2012, pp. 380-381). This developed into the elaborate frame narrative of the popular YouTube web series *Marble Hornets* (2009 - ). As an early film treatment of the Slender Man character, *Marble Hornets* amassed a surprisingly large cult following considering the limitations of the production and the quirks of the early YouTube platform.

Although the Something Awful community understood Slender Man in film terms and built the character partially from film and television references, the wider community’s adoption of elaborate frame narratives and multi-layered fictions also came to privilege an aesthetic of realism. As the Slender Man character was circulated more widely than the Something Awful forum, new communities developed around new mediated Slender stories. One such community was YouTube, which at that time still had a reputation for providing community generated content. Today, critics such as Morreale (2014) argue that established production companies have long been producing content under the guise of user generated content, but *Marble Hornets* imparted Slender Man with an aesthetic of realism bound up in the perception that YouTube offered more real, more direct content than traditional television or Hollywood production channels.

The technical means available to the communities that were participating in Slender's spread around the web – blogs, creepypasta forums, amateur video on YouTube – reinforced an aesthetic of realism. Users situated Slender in realistic frame narratives and revelled in the degrees of separation the new media technologies afforded – anonymous user names, an easy elision between the fiction and seemingly real people in seemingly real situations, and untraceable first person accounts posted to websites where the validity of the story would not necessarily need to be confirmed but would still aggrandize the impact of the Slender Man character. In its prioritisation of such an aesthetic of realism, Slender reflects the credible setting disrupted by the supernatural that continues to establish the formal expectations of the ghost story.

As an aesthetic, the realism of a cultural product like *Marble Hornets* is part structural. As film students making a film about film students, the producers of *Marble Hornets* had more limited technical means than even micro budget independent film or television productions, let alone a bigger Hollywood production house. Access to camera, sound, lighting equipment and so on was comparably limited as was access to post-production editing and special effects. These limitations are evident in the final product. Scenes are frequently poorly lit, the narrative is delivered in short fragments, and poor sound or shaky camera work are refigured as an aesthetic of realism and an expression of fear, as in many found footage horror film productions. These amateur production values came to be understood and frequently mocked among the community exchanging Slender Man content (see [knowyourmeme.com](http://knowyourmeme.com) for more details about technical failings that became humorous memes in their own right like Trender Man, and the 20 Dollars parody).

The mistakes and compounding references remained an in-joke for many while nevertheless solidifying Slender Man with an aesthetic of realism. Users carefully and specifically prioritized the aesthetic of realism to the point that as Slender became circulated more widely, new audiences were less able to discern what was reality and what was fiction.

In the circles that helped create and popularize the Slender Man mythos, a community formed around the very experience of systemic haunting. Rather than a specific creative production team for a film identifying an aspect of technology as a social anxiety to which to affix fear, horror, or haunting, several organic communities actively participated in the creation and distribution of viral hauntings. The idea that something that began as wholly, deliberately, and evidently fictitious migrated into contemporary lived social experience is part of what sparked the moral panic about Slender Man.

### **The Slender Stabbings: Proxies of Slender**

In what has become widely known as ‘The Slender Stabbings’, Morgan Geyser and Anissa Weier stabbed their friend and left her to die, thus stirring the news media into a moral panic about Slender Man. Each development in the ongoing case, like the decision to try the young women as adults, and the introduction of recent medical mental health diagnoses (Ford, 2014), is an opportunity to renew the moral panic surrounding Slender Man. An HBO documentary on Slender Man and the Slender Stabbings, *Beware the Slenderman* was released in 2016, looking to capitalise on the true-crime documentary trend in the wake of the success of the popular Netflix documentary series, *Making a Murder* (2015 – ).

As the news of the Slender Stabbings was reported more widely in 2014, media outlets scrambled to try to understand The Slender Man, and how he could influence twelve-year-old children to attempt murder. As part of the ensuing moral panic around the Slender Man character, headlines like: ‘Slender Man: The Online Horror Creature That Is Inspiring Children To Attempt to Kill’ (Nelson, 2014), saw the news media routinely establish the fictitious origins of the character but chart his growing influence and effect in contemporary lived social experience.

Later in 2014, a teenager who confessed to enjoying reading and writing stories for websites associated with Slender Man set fire to her house while her family slept inside. In a press conference about the incident the reporting Sheriff said, ‘there are things on the internet that are disturbing, that are causing kids to lose a sense of reality’ (Saul, 2014). In response to the Wisconsin stabbings, Knudsen released a public statement saying: ‘[m]any of these stories yes, are filled with an illusion of reality to them in an effort to make them much more unnerving. However, that does not change the fact that they are concoctions of fantasy’ (Speciyogic, 2014). Much less sensitive, the Something Awful community issued their response:

We are 15 years post-*Blair Witch*. These girls were 12. Found footage Youtubes, shaking cameras and bad Photoshops of people with socks on their head standing in the woods should not be fooling anyone. Especially not 12 year olds who should be better at the Internet and media culture than actual adults. But maybe all these chemtrail and Art Bells are actually making people dumber. Maybe there is a lot of lead paint being used in Waukesha [Wisconsin]. Maybe the Internet makes you stupid. (Parsons, 2014)

Part of what spurred on the moral panic was the fact that Slender Man was so thoroughly unknown to the general population in 2014, but so intimately known among savvy Internet users since 2009. As such there are clear differences in tone from the news reporting of real and dangerous events, and the vast community of Internet denizens that are not only fans of the horror meme but also shared in its creation, distribution, and popularity. I will return to some of the points the Something Awful response raises, but the fact that what began as evident fiction had been confused with reality is of note.

The Slender Stabbings present a means to chart the journey of the Slender Man character from a niche Internet forum to notorious popular culture icon. But through that progression, the Slender Stabbings case also helps show the gradual solidification of Slender's aesthetic. As I have been arguing Slender's aesthetic is based on numerous cult and popular horror literary, film, and video game references. His aesthetic is both specifically digital and in the specific register of haunting. As I am moving on to argue, one effect of Slender's digital aesthetic of haunting, including its emphasis on realism, is that Slender was specifically created to haunt the on and offline divide.

Slender's hunting (and haunting) grounds are precisely the ambiguous divide between the virtual and the real. Both Knudsen's and the Something Awful community's response affirms that haunting the on and offline divide, and blurring the boundary between reality and fiction, are a conscious aesthetic choice and deliberate characteristic of the Slender Man. Yet, if people are always in proximity to the Internet, if the Internet and access to technology has shaped social behaviours (mobile phone use, wide-spread fast access, etc.), then media use and media literacy

is simply another aspect of lived social experience and it is less surprising that the distinctions between on and offline would be blurred. This claim is complicated by the moral panic surrounding Slender because despite Cohen's (2002) initial focus on the youth groups the Mods and the Rockers as especially evident *causes* of moral panic, contemporary iterations of media moral panics are also bound up with paternalistic fears *about* young people as an especially vulnerable group in need of protection.

The Something Awful community response admonishes the Slender Stabbings teens not only for not being as Internet savvy as the Something Awful community, but for not being as Internet savvy as they expect twenty-first century children to be. The Something Awful community response indicates the degree of subcultural capital (Thornton, 1995) that has been invested in the creation and circulation of Slender Man. The Slender Man communities suggests a fascinating, amorphous chaos of specific, but organically established subcultural capital and behaviours in a state of constant evolution and cross-reference. These behaviours, including browsing habits, specific language, abbreviations, navigation and organization techniques, meme knowledge, quality standards, distribution channels, etc. that proficient users learn and adapt to on the fly, are not exclusive to the Slender Man community. The Something Awful response about expecting children to know these unspoken rules suggest their prevalence across wider Internet use, and are among the factors that contribute to the inherent media literacy of young people sometimes referred to as Digital Natives (Palfrey, 2008). The division between people who "get" the intricacies and implications of these behaviours and subcultural capital

exchanges and those who do not is perfectly evident. Such a division clearly factored into the media coverage of the Slender Stabbings.

To read the Slender Stabbings case and the surrounding ongoing moral panic as an example of the definitive breakdown between distinctions between the real and the virtual recalls Jeffrey Sconce's (2000) criticism of the 'infinitely reversible' (p. 180) binaries of postmodern theory. As I stated in the introduction, Sconce argues that 'the most thriving form of the postmodern occult has arisen from this gradual reification of Baudrillard's enigmatic maxims and reversible binaries, producing a mediascape that is no longer seen as metaphorically more real than the real – but is addressed as a genuinely paranormal replacement of the real, as if simulation were a material transformation rather than a semiotic process' (182). Sconce's critique of the 'postmodern occult' (p. 182) is part of the inspiration in situating the ghost and contemporary themes of haunting in more productive, more specific contexts, such as the organic formation of a passionate, generative, participatory community of people who enjoy horror, being afraid and scaring others.

### **Reading Slender: Networked Spectrality**

Slender Man is a product of the Internet and as such is saturated with its affordances. They inform every aspect of him, even as he continues to grow and circulate. They cannot easily be separated. Among the many depictions and characterizations of Slender Man are the spectral tentacles issuing forth from his back and sides. In addition to complicating both the comfort and strangeness of his appearance, these tentacles mimic his powers of stretching his limbs and spreading his maddening presence. I consider Slender Man's tentacles to be a graphic

interpretation of the expansive, ethereal, technical networks that make up the Internet. Created on and for the Internet, there are several factors that relate Slender Man and networked spectrality, including highly relevant comparisons to the persistent, replicable, scaleable and searchable affordances of the Internet that boyd (2010a) has observed.

boyd's understanding of each of these Internet affordances lends itself to the terms of networked spectrality: a lack of spatial, social, and temporal boundaries complicate meaning. The persistence and replicability of digital information relates to multiplicity, and can account for Slender Man's vast circulation around the web. The multiple iterations of Slender Man, and the fluidity of his story differentiate him from more traditional, singular ghosts. Scalability and searchability are concerned with scope: networked publics are extensive, connecting geographically diverse people who then build strong communities around their interest. Through an understanding of networked spectrality, a ghost like Slender Man is untethered from the site-specific and condition-dependent trappings of tradition to haunt the far-reaching nodes of the network.

These structural components of networked publics help make evident some of the complexities that surround Slender Man. These include his fluid, intimate relationship with new media, but also the participatory nature of his creation, distribution, and even how he haunts. In terms of networked spectrality Slender Man is an example of the figure of the ghost and the theme of haunting transitioning from a singular, specific model to a vast, multiple, model that reflects the traits and cultural use of the Internet. To that end, I use networked spectrality to read Slender as multiply multiple. There are several versions of the Slender Man story, each



adding to the mythos. Almost anyone can contribute to Slender, but this presents some legal, creative, and profit goal differences. It also means that Slender is effectively impossible to exorcise, a prevailing trope of depictions of new media hauntings. Such a vast body of Slender Man material feeds into the obsessive impulses of 'Slender Sickness'. The victim's compounding obsession is dangerous because it makes him or her more susceptible to Slender in a loop that tends to end with the phrase 'missing, presumed dead'. The spread of Slender Sickness is related to his mystique, another characteristic that links Slender to the affordances of networked publics.

The affordance of replicability enables and reinforces Slender Man's blank, morphing characteristics but is also reflected in the common practice of sharing this type of material in the 'creepypasta' format. Creepypasta fiction replicates a story from one site or message board to another. In terms of data this practice sees manifest copies, perfect and also near perfect copies as the information spreads through the Internet distribution network and people begin to modify, expand, and remix the story. This introduces the important element of participating in the exchange.

Participating in the generation, circulation, and consumption of Slender Man memes also establishes subcultural capital among the horror meme community. I consider these aspects of scalability, searchability, and scope of the Slender Man phenomenon. These aspects of networked spectrality caused people to bring Slender Man from the web into lived social experience. What I am arguing, however, is that Slender's aesthetic was communally negotiated to blur the division between the fiction and social experience, and complicate users' comfort with and widespread

use of the Internet. It is no wonder people use the term ‘proxies’ when discussing acolytes of Slender Man because the term indicates the intimacy between the user and the web, and Slender and the user.

Through the collective generation of Slender and the intentional depiction of haunting that blurs the on and offline experience, the Slender phenomenon has incorporated the postmodern occult *as part of its aesthetic of haunting* and incorporated the awareness of it into the structure of contemporary conceptions of media hauntings. Sconce refutes Baudrillard as the basis of his critique of the postmodern occult. Invoking McLuhan’s famed formulation, Baudrillard writes in *Simulations* (1983), ‘[t]he medium is no longer identifiable as such, and the merging of the medium and the message is the first great formula of this new age,’ (quoted in Sconce, p.182). As Sconce argues, to believe such a merger is ‘literally true demonstrates nothing less than faith in the supernatural’ (p. 182). For Sconce such a general application of the postmodern occult has troubling implications because it occludes important material factors surrounding new technologies and the cultural interpretation of those technologies as haunted media. But to incorporate such a prevailing belief about haunting into the fiction *as part of the structure of the haunting*, situates mediated haunting not as faith in the supernatural, but as a material context of lived social experience.

**So you want to Join Anonymous? You cannot join Anonymous. Welcome to Anonymous.**

Slender Man and the community whom helped produce him is a celebratory, participatory use of fear and horror. Slender’s origins and continued community

participation are comparatively devoid of political motivations or affiliations, a key difference between the use of fear and an aesthetic of haunting in the Anonymous community. Synthesizing the complexities of Anonymous, and the scholastic commentary, I address it as a collective made up of hackers, activists, and others that participate in the shared visual and symbolic free-floating signifier, 'Anonymous'.

Gabriella Coleman's *Anonymous in Context: The Politics and Power behind the Mask* (2013) provides a chronology of the most significant events in Anonymous' history from 2004. Anonymous received the most media attention and subsequent notoriety for their operations in support of Wikileaks (2010), their association with the Occupy Movement (2011), hacking and publishing private documents related to Sony and other movie studios (2011), and for the role they played in drawing media attention to revolutionary events in Tunisia and Egypt (2011). In *Anonymous, Anonymity, and the End(s) of Identity and Groups Online*, Michael Wesch (2012), and his Digital Ethnography Class of Spring 2009 detail Anonymous' origins on 4chan and the highly complex identity work Anonymous enables and encourages.

As an organization that collectively disavows the concept of identity and even imagines themselves as the 'harbingers of the *end* of identity' (Wesch, 2012, p. 89) it is no straightforward task to summarise Anonymous. The play with steadfast notions of identity is one of the many reasons for the notoriety of Anonymous amongst mainstream and new media outlets, scholars, and the general population. Coleman introduces Anonymous as a 'protest ensemble that has been adept at magnifying issues, boosting existing — usually oppositional — movements and converting amorphous discontent into a tangible form' (2013, p. 2).

Wesch introduces the phenomenon of Anonymous as presenting ‘a scathing critique of the postmodern cult of celebrity, individualism, and identity while presenting itself as the inverted alternative – a “group” made up entirely of unidentified and unidentifiable “members” whose presence and membership is fleeting and ephemeral’ (p. 89). The inability to fix stable identifiers to the collective leads scholars to consider Anonymous as an ‘improper name’ (Deseriis, 2015), providing the conditions for ‘generativity, democracy, and instability’ (Coleman, 2010); a ‘shared pseudonym and attendant set of symbols that enables collective identification and recognition’ (Fish, 2017).

Some Anonymous members describe the collective as ‘horizontally formed and leaderless’ (Fish, 2017), identifying as a ‘nomadic war machine’. Some informants consider their organization a ‘rhizome’ or ‘hivemind’ (quoted in Fish, 2017), even ‘the first Internet-based superconsciousness’ (quoted in Wesch, 2012, p.89). They use the metaphor of travellers moving together for a short time in a journey that ‘might change the world’ (*How to Join Anonymous*, 2012). Anonymous’ conscious, complex disavowal of identification leads Wesch to conclude that ‘Anonymous plays with and mocks the concepts of “identity”, “community,” and “groups,” making a joke out of them and creating a dynamic and living social formation that is not based on identified or identifiable individuals in an identified or identifiable “group”’ (2012, p.102).

To further complicate a summary of Anonymous, there are numerous ‘distinct and stable activist nodes’ (Coleman, 2013, p.3) leading Anonymous eventually to use the slogan ‘Anonymous is not unanimous’ (Coleman, 2013, p. 6). The many nodes and factions of Anonymous, and its mutability and dynamism have

led mainstream media, political organizations (including the Obama administration, see Coleman, 2013 p. 2), and scholars to make largely unfounded claims about Anonymous. These include suggestions that Anonymous is leaderless and chaotic and operates according to unknown socio-political motivations. Even the US National Security Agency (NSA) labelled Anonymous an imminent threat to national security because of wild speculation that it might be able to cause a power outage via a wide-scale collaborative cyber-attack (Coleman, 2013, p. 11; Gorman, 2012). Overblown fears like a hacker or a hacking collective causing a power outage are frequently dramatized in film and television cultural products, notably in *Hackers* (Softley, 1995), *CSI: Cyber* ('Bit by Bit', 2015), and *Mr. Robot* (2015 – ).

While grandiose claims, and fears about precisely what Anonymous is capable of, are being contextualized by ongoing scholarship, Coleman finds that as 'nimble, flexible, and emergent' as Anonymous is, it is not 'random, shadowy, or chaotic' (2013, p.4). Coleman even finds that despite Anonymous' celebration of anonymity at the philosophical level, many Anonymous are known, choose not to wear a mask, and are comparatively readily available. As Coleman points out '[i]f you want to talk with some participants, simply log onto one of their IRC [Instant Relay Chat] networks' (2013, p12).

Known or anonymous behind a Guy-Fawkes mask, some Anonymous affiliates consider their collective capable of 'ultra-coordinated motherfuckery' (Coleman, 2012). All of these iterations of what it means to be Anonymous amount to considerable misinformation surrounding the collective, which, along with its ability to land mainstream media attention, are essential parts of its geopolitical power (Coleman, 2013, p.2). Although the extent of Anonymous's geopolitical power

remains unknown, recent scholarship, including Coleman and Fish (2017) find the emergence of centralized leadership, and a better understanding of Anonymous' limited technical abilities to make good on its threats.

### **Anonymous Official**

This case study is not meant as an exhaustive survey or history of Anonymous videos; rather I am interested in tracking the elements that make up the now highly recognisable brand-like aesthetics of Anonymous as they have come to rest as a digital aesthetic of haunting. These elements include the development of a logo and slogan, standardised production values including intro and outro cues, the predominance of the Guy Fawkes mask, visuals and themes inspired from *The Matrix* Trilogy (1999 – 2003) and *V for Vendetta* (2006), and excessive use of special effects to achieve a glitch aesthetic.

My analysis is centred around the Anonymous Official YouTube page because it is among the top search results on Google and Bing. There are some problems with using search results as a metric of popularity, since there are many technical means of favourably manipulating them. But I proceed because the search query results would be the first port of call for most people who do not know about Anonymous but want to learn. It should be noted, however, that many nodes of Anonymous do not recognize the Official page as speaking for all of Anonymous. AnonOps for example, tends to favour hacktivism and technical disruption whereas Project Chanology favours organised protest. There are plenty of Anonymous related YouTube channels and videos outside of the 'Official' YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and Google + iterations. As a global movement, there are localised Anonymous, with

more overtly political content coming from Spain, Greece, and France, for example, that do not necessarily endorse Anonymous Official.

I use the Anonymous Official YouTube page because it is a top search result, because it has self-styled as 'Official', and because many viewers do not necessarily have reason to doubt its official status. I feel comfortable generalising about the Anonymous Official videos because it presents itself as a general resource.

Anonymous want maximum impact for their videos and the popularity of the Official YouTube page serves to galvanize supporters and sympathizers while aggrandizing the mystique and misinformation that surrounds Anonymous generally, which ultimately provides a better platform to consolidate attention and fear in the new media attention economies.

As the aesthetic elements of Anonymous videos become more homogenised, recent videos appear to follow a standardised production format. Codified as 'Official', the image elements of recent Anonymous videos are limited reinforcing a unified, recognisable aesthetic. Due to the collective nature of Anonymous that specifically defies the notion of authorship, anyone with the technical ability and the hard and software *could* make an Anonymous video. But recent scholarship (Coleman, 2013; Fish, 2017) has found that despite Anonymous' boasts that it is leaderless, there is a complex horizontal hierarchy and organisation structure, especially evident in the production and distribution of video messages related to Anonymous Operations and those released on the Anonymous Official YouTube page. This increased control over video releases indicates the crucial importance Anonymous places on video as its preferred medium of communication.

Based on Anonymous informants who produced the video campaign for Operation Last Resort, Fish (2017) identifies video as playing a crucial role in Anonymous' public relations, specifically, the dissemination of Anonymous 'propaganda'. According to informant Anonymousworldwar3, 'video is basically the main part of Anon's PR work and the main medium to influence public opinion and thus politics. So basically, video is the most important and efficient medium for propaganda out there, hence we try to use it as extensively and good as we can' (quoted in Fish, 2017). The idea that Anonymous consider its videos 'public relations' and vehicles of propaganda speaks to Anonymous' goals of not so subtly rallying allies, influencing public opinion, and inciting the wide range of individuals, organizations and causes Anonymous consider enemies.

While Fish considers the audience of Anonymous videos to be 'any internet video and television news viewer who sees their videos and propaganda projects' (2017), Coleman (2013) recognises the success of any particular video based on its visibility and popularity on YouTube and other mainstream media outlets. Anonymous' geopolitical power and fear factor as a collective agent, she observes, is based on 'its ability to land media attention, its bold and recognizable aesthetics, its participatory openness, the misinformation that surrounds it and, in particular, its unpredictability' (Coleman, 2013, p. 2). The overwhelming majority of Anonymous videos are intended for public consumption and distribution. Moreover, the videos are deliberately evocative, in the playful but threatening style that characterises Anonymous across all avenues, and can be polemic, incendiary and full of ominous declarations of war. Recent Anonymous videos tend to be made by members who



have more specific training in video production, reinforcing a unified aesthetic and production value.

### **Early Anonymous Aesthetics: We are Anonymous**

As I will explain throughout this section, I am interested in the standardisation of Anonymous' aesthetic elements as I argue they are being marshalled in a register of haunting to surround the message with a sense of fear. I begin with the video *Message to Scientology* (2008) which represents the early galvanizing of the collective trolling nature of Anonymous into more direct political activism. From this early video, the development of the highly recognisable aesthetics of today's Anonymous can be tracked. Notably, *Message to Scientology* is not included on the Anonymous Official YouTube page.

Despite the diverse and disparate nature of Anonymous, between 2008 and 2016 signature aesthetic elements become codified and indicate the building of an Anonymous brand. Some such aesthetics are: the Anonymous logo and slogan, and its use as a predominant introductory and concluding element; a single, hooded, Guy-Fawkes-mask-wearing presenter directly addressing the audience; the use of popular or cult film audio or video clips; and the collection of special (digital) effects that dominate recent Anonymous videos. While the philosophy of Anonymous as a collective of anonymous agents can undermine specific claims, the fact that there is an 'Official' Anonymous YouTube page, selling Anonymous branded t-shirts, is evidence of a prevailing aesthetic among the community of participants and audience members.

The general philosophy about *why* Anonymous circulates video communiques, and to *whom*, provides a context for the *how* (aesthetics) and *what* (social impact and meaning) of any given video. I argue that in addition to magnifying the message, a principal expected outcome of Anonymous videos is to galvanise sympathetic supporters while instilling fear and aggrandising the mystique and misinformation that surrounds Anonymous. boyd's (2012) investigation into the role of fear in contemporary networked attention economies helps support this claim. Fish's informants also support this claim, in their stated aim of instilling fear in 'our enemies' (2017). Thus, there is an incredible difference between the dark, special-effects-laden, digitally distorted glitch-aesthetic that dominates recent Anonymous videos, and the aesthetic of the nascent *Message to Scientology*.

It is clear when comparing *Message to Scientology* to other more recent Anonymous videos such as the ongoing *Message to the Citizens* series (see *Figures 4.15 - 4.19*) that the content of this video is more significant than the visuals. *Message to Scientology* begins in a mock polite tone as a voice augmented with digital distortion says, 'Hello, Scientology. We are Anonymous' (2008). The voice narrates a threatening letter over footage of rolling clouds (see *Figures 4.5 and 4.6*).



*Figure 4.5 A voice full of digital distortion narrates a threatening letter over ominous clouds in Message to Scientology (2008).*



*Figure 4.6 The other cloud scape in Message to Scientology is more sunny than ominous (2008).*

As an early example of Anonymous unifying to promote direct political action, rather than previous trolling campaigns, there is little indication of concern over the aesthetics, certainly no awareness of specific branding elements. The two cut-together clips of rolling clouds also do not indicate a great degree of technical video production skill. Without the narration, the clouds do not convey much sense of fear or threat. At their worst they are ominous (see *Figure 4.5*), but at times the scene does not match the menacing tone of the content (see *Figure 4.6*).

The content of *Message to Scientology* is an early draft of what can be considered some of Anonymous' founding principles:

You cannot hide; we are everywhere. We cannot die; we are forever. We're getting bigger every day--and solely by the force of our ideas, malicious and hostile as they often are. If you want another name for your opponent, then call us Legion, for we are many' [...] 'For the good of your followers, for the good of mankind--for the laughs--we shall expel you from the Internet and systematically dismantle the Church of Scientology in its present form [...]

Knowledge is free. We are Anonymous. We are Legion. We do not forgive. We do not forget. Expect us. (2008)

The rhetoric of going on a campaign of expulsion from the Internet suggest Anonymous' current incarnation as absolute protector of freedom of speech (stylised in the gamer culture of the Internet as the End Boss of the Internet), especially free speech on the Internet but also as a core value in their social and political action.

It is telling about Anonymous' stance on religion that their declaration of opposition to Scientology uses language and themes from the Bible. The phrase, 'We are Legion' references Mark 5: 1-20 in which as part of an exorcism, Jesus asks the

name of the malign influence over the possessed man and a host of demons reply, 'My name is Legion for we are many' (Mark 5: 9). But as Anonymous' body of action and organised operations indicate, the collective tends to be highly secular and even anti-religion generally. Anonymous opposes organizations they consider to be tyrannical, religions and corporations alike, from a position of championing freedom of speech. Thus, the biblical allusions do not align Anonymous with the Christian faith, rather a case could be made for Anonymous aligning itself with the demons. This reinforces the tendency toward pranks, and disruption for the sake of the laughs or the 'lulz' as this type of behaviour is known in the Anonymous community (Coleman, 2012). It also characterises Anonymous as an incorporeal, multiplicitous entity.

Reading Anonymous as a spectral entity capable of possession and exponential haunting is further reinforced in the statements 'We do not forgive' and 'We do not forget' (*Message to Scientology*, 2008). In Christianity and in the Bible, God and Jesus forgive: to err is human, to forgive is divine. A signature feature of the traditional ghost is that it also does not forget the grievances it takes to the grave. In the statement, 'We do not forget', Anonymous appeals to the confessional and final judgement aspects of Christianity, but rephrases it as an expression of their spectral vigilante collective: the End Boss of free speech, a multiplicitous host, that imagines it both has, and does not need, the moral high ground.

Although there are no signature visual elements in *Message to Scientology* the phrase: 'We are Anonymous. We are Legion. We do not forgive. We do not forget. Expect us', was recognized as especially evocative and has become an important part of the philosophy, branding, and aesthetics of Anonymous as it

functions today, especially in what became the Anonymous logo and slogan, and a frequent means of signing off videos. The slogan in Anonymous Official YouTube page banner (*Figure 4.7*) includes a significant article – we are *a* legion, opposed to we are Legion. ‘A Legion’ is a unit in the Roman army, an association that militarises Anonymous but also suggestively limits them to the 3,000 to 6,000 soldiers. Indeed, Fish situates Anonymous within a complex context of securitizing discourse, composed of ‘universalizing speech acts about global existential threats’ with specifically militaristic themes. Some Anonymous embrace the militaristic associations although others consider them undercutting the effectiveness of the collective (Fish, 2017). Despite the Anonymous Official header, the most common expression of the slogan is ‘We are Legion’. ‘Legion’ is more suggestive of themes of multiplicity, fluidity, and the uncountable and is thus much more subversive even before the demonic connotations. The inclusion of the ‘a’ then is both crass and telling. It is available to be read as an embrace of the militaristic, but also as an elaborate troll (of the type Anonymous routinely revel in, as observed by Wesch, 2012), and a further point of contention for those that resist an ‘official’ Anonymous.



*Figure 4.7 The Anonymous Official YouTube header banner that features the slogan as ‘We are a Legion’ rather than the more common ‘We are Legion’ (‘Anonymous Official’, 2017).*

The Anonymous logo has undergone minimal changes since its inception. What is striking about the logo is that it does not feature the otherwise iconic Guy Fawkes mask, which plays so large across Anonymous' aesthetics and branding as I will discuss shortly. This may indicate that the logo developed independently of the predominance of the Guy Fawkes mask as a signature of the collective (Batman masks, and masquerade masks were also considered but deemed too difficult and expensive respectively to acquire en masse, *Top 5 Fact about Anonymous*, 2016). In place of a Guy Fawkes mask, a black suit and tie suggest a male figure, placed between two branches, but the figure has a large question mark instead of facial features (see *Figure 4.8*). The figure has clear aesthetic similarities to Slender Man who also wears a black suit and has no facial features. Even without the iconic Guy Fawkes mask, the Anonymous logo effectively communicates many of the principles that surround Anonymous. As a logo, the choice of branches directly indicate the United Nations logo (see *Figure 4.8*).



*Figure 4.8 A side by side comparison between the UN and Anonymous Logos ('The United Nations Emblem', 1946; Anonymous – How to Join Anonymous, 2015).*

The United Nations logo could be the source from which the Anonymous logo was created or modified by digital image manipulation software. The crossed branches in the UN's logo are olive branches, a historic symbol of peace. Like other global or national logos and symbols, the UN logo is an 'aspirational symbol', speaking 'to the hopes and dreams of people the world over, for peace and unity' ('UN Logo and Flag', 2017). Re-appropriated by Anonymous, the symbol simultaneously adds gravitas and legitimacy to the Anonymous project but also suggests the ethos of Anonymity: multiplicity, leaderless-ness, the in-corporality (and thus immortality) of an idea, among many other grandiose and playful interpretations of what it means to be anonymous (see Wesch, 2012).

I have already indicated some of the trouble in having an 'official' branch of an amorphous anonymous organization, with an official logo and symbol, but one evoked while knowingly disavowing traditional functions of symbols, adds many layers to the function of the Anonymous logo. As a free-floating signifier that nearly anyone can join, use, and participate in and with, the logo helps organize the activities of the collective. As already mentioned, most Anonymous activity that becomes popular or catches the eyes and ears of the news media is sanctioned by key members within the collective (Colman, 2013; Fish, 2017). The logo, then, acts like a brand, marking off 'official' Anonymous communications and attempting to ensure people take notice.

### **The Cult and Popular Culture References of Anonymous**

The core of Anonymous' principles and aesthetics are directly related to several popular and cult films, especially *They Live* (1988), *The Matrix Trilogy* (1999-



2003), Alan Moore's graphic novel *V for Vendetta* (1988) and its film adaptation (2006), plus a smattering of the masked vigilantism of Batman and the calculated lulz and high visibility of the Joker.<sup>8</sup> *V for Vendetta* is undeniably the most prominent influence on Anonymous' aesthetic. The Guy Fawkes mask directly links *V for Vendetta* and Anonymous, and due to the intentionally similar thematic and aesthetic choices, it can be argued that Anonymous' video messages to the public are a direct translation and extension of the plot. I focus on Anonymous' use of the film *V for Vendetta* rather than the graphic novel because of the film's centrality to Anonymous' aesthetic. The film is arguably a particularly faithful adaptation, adhering to the plot and maintaining the visual feel with the illustrator of the original graphic novel, David Lloyd, sharing the writing credits.<sup>9</sup>

McTeigue's adaptation is about one man's campaign of vengeance against the fascist state that subjected him to biological testing. The protagonist, 'V' (Hugo Weaving), wears a Guy Fawkes mask and promises the destruction of the Houses of Parliament. V hijacks the British broadcasting network, broadcasting a message on the emergency channel to ensure it is seen by most of the populace. In his broadcast,

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<sup>8</sup> More could be said about how Anonymous references Batman, but as they are more thematic than aesthetic, I make this association in passing. While I think such a discussion is relevant to my analysis of Anonymous, the inclusion of the varied Batman cultural history would widen the scope of my focus beyond a single thesis chapter, let alone one also addressing Slender Man. Whereas, *V for Vendetta* is a more crucial frame of reference.

<sup>9</sup> Alan Moore has a notorious personal objection to film adaptations of his comic and graphic novel works on the grounds that he intended them for the medium of print and that part of the appeal is the interplay between character, narrative, and visual expressed in panels. The film adaptations of *From Hell* (2001) and *The League of Extraordinary Gentleman* (2003), and some legal fallout, ultimately caused Moore to request his name be removed from all his works that he did not own personally, including *Watchmen* (1986-87) and *V for Vendetta* (1988). Moore feuded publically with producers of the *V for Vendetta* adaptation, but David Lloyd did not share Moore's position of principle.

V sits and speaks directly to the camera while a V TV logo clearly distinguishes this communique from the national propaganda distributed across the official news media networks. In the message, V calls for the population to meet him next November 5<sup>th</sup> at the Parliament building to celebrate its literal and symbolic toppling. At the conclusion of the film a mass of black-clad, Guy-Fawkes-mask-wearing citizens push past the military blockade to see the triumphant Hollywood climax complete with stunning visuals of Big Ben exploding into a fireworks display as Tchaikovsky's '1812 Overture' crescendos: the very picture of the union between Hollywood fiction and special effects (*V for Vendetta*, 2005).

Anonymous' videos, made specifically available to the public with the express intention of achieving mass, viral circulation, especially on established news media networks, mimic V's media hijacking stunt. In the graphic novel there are much more specific connections to computer hacking, but both feed Anonymous' interpretation of using the Guy Fawkes mask to call the general population toward theatrics-inspired political action. In both the graphic novel and the film adaptation, V oscillates between revolutionary and terrorist and complicates the role of villain and/or superhero. Anonymous occupies a similarly complex socio-cultural role between masked revolutionaries defending Internet free speech, and dangerous cyber terrorist organisation whose power and motives are deliberately unknown.

Anonymous' ability to directly affect socio-political life is complicated by their relationship to the Internet as a means of organization and collective action. But it is telling that as a central model for their aesthetic they favour V. 'Unable to live life directly,' James R. Keller writes, 'V must settle for aesthetic stimulation and the ecstasy of retribution and gore that defines his monomaniacal pursuit' (2008, pp. 166-167).

Ghosts are similarly unable to directly affect life. The themes of indirect but significant action, aesthetic stimulation, and retribution become expressed as specifically related to the spectral in Anonymous' recent videos that represent a gradual refining of the collective's aesthetics into a distinct digital aesthetic of haunting. I will expound these claims in due course.



Figure 4.9 The iconic unmasking scene at the conclusion of *V for Vendetta* (2006) as the background for an Anonymous video (*Anonymous: Operation Occupy Wall Street Call to Action*, 2011).

Themes and clips from the *V for Vendetta* film are frequent in Anonymous videos. YouTube has algorithms that generally find and delete copyrighted material, but Anonymous also has the technical skills, including encryption and mirroring techniques, to ensure their videos remain highly visible (see Fish, 2017). The image most commonly used is the mass of individuals all wearing Guy Fawkes masks (see

*Figure 4.9*). In the rhetoric of Anonymous this image is the visual expression of the idea of multiplicity, of being legion. Adding a spectral element, it is telling that in the film, when the mass unmask in triumph, they are the characters previously shown dying at the hands of the tyrannical government. The scene establishes a direct correlation between the film and the core Anonymous ideal of the incorporeality, longevity and even the immortality of an idea. This is another important aspect of Anonymous as an example of networked spectrality and an aesthetics of haunting: the relating of indirect and direct political action as a form of haunting.

In *V for Vendetta*, V delivers several moving monologues about the nature of being anonymous and wearing a mask. After being shot several times, V ominously replies to Creedy's (Tim Pigott-Smith) frantic question, 'Why won't you die?', saying: 'Beneath this mask there is more than flesh. Beneath this mask there is an idea, Mr. Creedy. And ideas are bulletproof' (2006). The concept that an idea, in its purest form, cannot die is repeatedly woven throughout the film, including as a backdrop for the suggested love story between V and the other central protagonist, Evey Hammond (Natalie Portman). In the graphic novel the continuation of an idea is literalised as Evey dons the Guy Fawkes mask with the implication that she, along with an apprentice of her own, will continue where V left off. The immortality and purity of an idea is a recurring sentiment in revolutionary speech and rhetoric more generally (workers of the world unite!), but as a motif, it is a crucial concept that runs through many of the other film and television references that Anonymous draws on for its aesthetic.

### **The Anonymous Aesthetic Advances**

The March 25, 2015 video, *Anonymous – How to join Anonymous*<sup>10</sup> acts as a bridge between earlier Anonymous video styles and the more recent videos being produced and uploaded today. The video incorporates the logo as an introductory cue, and features a person wearing a Guy Fawkes mask delivering a message directly to the viewers. Horizontal distortion elements and jump cuts to a close up of the Guy Fawkes mask all show the trajectory of Anonymous' aesthetic developments from the nascent *Message to Scientology*. The image aesthetics and the content work together to produce the vaguely threatening, but also strangely inviting, tone. The video shares the trope of this binary collapse with Slender Man. This video details many prominent aspects of Anonymous' philosophy and the (non) means by which people can join, a feature in Anonymous' digital aesthetic of haunting. The conflicting terms of joining Anonymous are important themes I return to when I consider Anonymous as an example of networked spectrality.

*How to Join Anonymous* (2015) starts with a specific sound cue and a spinning globe news-bulletin style graphic that morphs into the Anonymous logo. The logo and slogan play as predominant introductory and concluding elements of many Anonymous videos. In mimicking this element of the news media, Anonymous continues to play with their relationship to it, but also appeals to and mocks its

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<sup>10</sup> Variations on the content of this video abound across even the loosest Anonymous affiliations on the Internet. A search on YouTube returns 520,000 results. While not all of these are iterations of the How to Join Anonymous script, this content is among the most adapted and shared. As such, it is a rallying point for an otherwise highly diverse community. Because this content exists in so many iterations its origins have been somewhat obscured (perhaps intentionally). The oldest videos on Anonymous Official are from January 2012. Although I refer to the video uploaded in 2015, it is highly likely that the video elements date from much earlier, perhaps coinciding more with the early 2008 videos. In terms of the evolution of Anonymous' digital aesthetic I consider this content more akin to videos produced in 2008 or 2012 than 2016 and now.

authority. With official intro and outro logos with industry standard sound cues, Anonymous videos style themselves as, and appeal to the same authority as, news media outlets. Nick Couldry (2012) discusses this as part of the ritual experience of media, including the ritual of watching the news, but also the power viewers afford to the media ritual of the news broadcast. While these specific intro and outro cues suggest official news media correspondence, they also reference the broadcast interludes that V performs in televised segments in *V for Vendetta*. The *How to Join Anonymous* video features a figure, likely a male, in dark hooded clothing, wearing a Guy Fawkes mask and seeming to read this special bulletin from a desk. In the upper left hand corner is the Anonymous logo adapted to include the letters 'TV', read together as 'Anonymous TV' (see *Figure 4.10*). The similarities to the V TV logo, including the font, draw an intentional parallel.



*Figure 4.10* The How to Join Anonymous video draws specific and intentional parallels to traditional broadcast media outlets (2015).

While clearly an advance from *Message to Scientology*, this is still a comparably minimal video in terms of production design although it is notably enhanced with several digital effects. The speech is digitally distorted as it is throughout most Anonymous videos. But the image is overlaid with a filter that causes occasional distortion and persistent horizontal lines. The colour palette is washed out, but a greenish or bluish filter is evident. The digital effects appear to include diverse effect elements, causing different elements to move and distort on different layers of the final digital video image. Fish (2017) observes some of these digital effects as precautions against YouTube's deleting algorithms, thus providing a technical means of ensuring the video remains in its intended form. In terms of visual elements however, as mentioned, the video is minimal. I argue that the aesthetics of the *How to join Anonymous* video reference the other dominant cultural product from which Anonymous draws much of its image and themes, *The Matrix*. The greenish tint, the distorting lines, and the positioning of the presenter are especially suggestive of the scene in *The Matrix* when Neo is captured and interrogated by Agents. What Anonymous draws most from *The Matrix*, however, is the idea that a group of suave, techno-chic hackers topple the oppressive regime of Machine overlords.

The philosophy and aesthetics of *The Matrix* are common motifs and direct references for Anonymous. In particular, Anonymous videos recall one of Neo's early conversations with Morpheus wherein they discuss the elaborate technical dream world they inhabit: 'Morpheus: What is the Matrix? Control. The Matrix is a computer-generated dream world, built to keep us under control' (1999). Clips of

Morpheus showing Neo the Matrix or close variations on these themes appear frequently in Anonymous videos. Elaborate conspiracy theories abound in Anonymous' aesthetics and philosophy as they also do in *V for Vendetta*, *The Matrix*, and the 1988 film *They Live*, another frequently used clip. *They Live*, written by famed horror writer and director John Carpenter under the name Frank Armitage, is about a drifter who finds special sunglasses that let him see the world as it is rather than the constructed world an alien race has built to render humans obedient and docile (see *Figure 4.11*). Carpenter's use of a pseudonym is fitting considering *They Live*'s themes of seeing through false constructs, but also because of Anonymous' own use of masks, pseudonyms, aliases, and digital avatars.



Figure 4.11 An example of Anonymous' appropriation of other cultural products including John Carpenter's 1988 film *They Live* (*Anonymous – THERE CAN BE A BETTER WORLD*, 2015).





Figure 4.12 Anonymous' appropriating a Newsroom (2012-2014) television clip and subjecting it to the Anonymous signature digital aesthetic (Anonymous – THERE CAN BE A BETTER WORLD, 2015).

Anonymous also include clips from television. As Figures 4.11 and 4.12 taken from a video called *Anonymous – THERE CAN BE A BETTER WORLD* (2015) demonstrate, the YouTube copyright algorithms removed the audio for sections of the video (note the text box in the upper left corner of the video: 'Audio was removed due to copyright. Audio begins at 2:18'). The audio was removed between the time I first watched the video and when I found it again to use as an example. Some of the audio that was removed was Morpheus explaining what the Matrix is to Neo. Visible in the *Newsroom* (2012-2014) clip is an early use of a glitch aesthetic in an Anonymous video (Figure 4.12).

There are specific reasons for the aesthetic and thematic similarities between *V for Vendetta* and *The Matrix*. *The Matrix Trilogy* was written and directed by Lilly and Lana Wachowski who also adapted *V for Vendetta* for the screen (both as The Wachowski Brothers). *V for Vendetta* is directed by James McTeigue who was also the second unit director of *The Matrix*. Hugo Weaving plays V and *The Matrix*'s Mr. Smith. An additional significant link between the visual and thematic styles of the two films is that Owen Paterson was the production designer for both.

I have only gestured to the many references Anonymous draws from in their cultivation of a recognisable, brand-like aesthetic. Clearly Anonymous favours the aesthetic and approach of Lana and Lilly Wachowski and their production team. But there is a further consideration of the cross appeal of these films and their references with Anonymous' imagined (and courted) audience. The audience of *The Matrix* and *V for Vendetta* are also the direct audience Anonymous intends for its videos: predominantly male, geeky and technically skilled, but also politically inclined, interested in conspiracy theories, revolutionary ideas and freedom of speech and expression. A claim could also be made that the films promote non-binary gender readings, audience and community, ideas not completely foreign to the complex identity work Anonymous encourages. The themes of vigilantism, revenge/vengeance, and the overthrow of tyrannical systems and governments play well to the sympathetic audience that spans both the films and the imagined audiences of Anonymous. They also form the basis of my readings of the digital aesthetics of haunting that I will expand upon shortly.

### **Anonymous and Networked Spectrality**

Before moving on to analyse the most recent aesthetics of Anonymous videos, I want to highlight some of the *How to join Anonymous* content because its constant assertion and denial of what Anonymous is establishes similar complexities around the present/absent and material/informational binaries that apply to Slender Man and other new media ghosts. ‘So, you want to join Anonymous?’, the video begins. ‘You cannot join Anonymous’. This rhetorical flourish, a disavowal of the previous statement, presenting seemingly opposing binaries, sets the tone for this Anonymous content. ‘Nobody could say: you are in, or you are out. Do you still want to join Anonymous? Well, you are in if you want to’ (*Anonymous – How to join Anonymous*, 2015).

The video is divided into sections with FAQ (frequently asked questions) type headings: ‘So you want to join Anonymous?’, ‘How to get in contact with others?’, ‘How Do I recognize other Anonymous?’, ‘Have you been infiltrated? How do I protect my privacy?’, ‘How Many Anonymous are there?’ In Anonymous’ characteristic brand of mischievous fear mongering and attention grabbing, the information is a blend of practical information, vague threats, and misdirection to help aggrandise the mystique of the collective. For example, the ‘How to get in contact with others?’ section is more of an explanation of what Anonymous is than a how-to guide:

Anonymous has no centralized infrastructure. We use existing facilities of the Internet, especially social networks, and we are ready to hop on to the next one if this one seems compromised, is under attack, or starts to bore us. Look

for terms like "anonymous", "anonops" and other keywords that might be connected to our activities.

To get to the practical information, viewers encounter plenty of Anonymous brand message: there is no centralised infrastructure; Anonymous will switch communication platforms if necessary. Read through networked spectrality these statements suggest Anonymous' amorphous, multiple collectivity and their nodular nature afforded by the packet-switching and binary data capacities that structure the digital exchange of information on the Internet. 'The values Anonymous defends-- digital freedom of speech and association, cryptographic anonymity, etc.' Fish states, '--are made possible because of the packet-switching and binary data capacities of the internet and computers. Anonymous translates these technological feature-sets into political values' (2017). In such a way, Anonymous mediates politics and political action through its own highly mediated sense of aesthetics, partially informed by an aesthetic of haunting.

The next section addresses Anonymous' cultivation of an aesthetic of multiplicity, anonymity, and scale:

How do I recognize other Anonymous? -

We come from all places of society: We are students, workers, clerks, unemployed; We are young or old, we wear smart clothes or rags, we are hedonists, ascetics, joy riders or activists. We come from all races, countries and ethnicities. We are many.

We are your neighbours, your co-workers, your hairdressers, your bus drivers and your network administrators. We are the guy on the street with the suitcase and the girl in the bar you are trying to chat up. We are anonymous.

Read as an example of networked spectrality Anonymous is a spectral multiplicity, an amorphous composite. It cannot be recognized by any one individual component. As a composite, it becomes impossible to identify or categorize one specific member.

Anonymous members are cast as ghost-like: a spectral force capable of socio-political action drawing on the social and technical affordances of the Internet as one of its modes of power.

Such a networked spectrality reading is reinforced by the aesthetics and language Anonymous use. The next section can be understood as Anonymous' cultivation of an aesthetic of anonymity and privacy, ostensibly answering the question 'How do I protect my privacy?'. The answer is both an affirmation of the aesthetic styling of Anonymous as a social phenomenon and an offering of technical tips to help ensure privacy online: 'Invent an alias, a nick[name], a pseudonym ... call it as you will, just invent something'. Here, anonymity is directly related to digital doubling, and the affordances of digital new media technologies that allow for the easy creation and use of such aliases and pseudonyms. The imperative, 'just invent something', delivered in Anonymous' characteristic almost threatening style, is also an invitation to become a generative community member.

In its final celebration of multiplicity as an aesthetic, the last portion of the *How to Join* video elaborates on the concept of being a collective Legion: 'How many Anonymous are there? We are more than you think. We are more than anybody thinks. We are many. And you are now one of us. Welcome to Anonymous'. The rhetorical technique, and the delivery of the line 'Welcome to Anonymous' is similar to the vaguely threatening conclusion to many Anonymous videos, 'Expect Us'.

'Welcome to Anonymous' is not a threat in the same capacity, but there is a similar

evocative power in the phrasing and delivery: We are many. And you are now one of us. Welcome to Anonymous, as if watching an Anonymous video amalgamates the viewer into the nebulous collective actively or tacitly, wilfully or under duress. The 'Do you want to meet a ghost?' viral-style video in *Pulse* (2006) offers a relevant comparison to the '*How to Join Anonymous*' themes of amalgamation into a nebulous collective since the 'meet a ghost' video is the gateway to the spectral.

Anonymous uses multiplicity, vast community participation and the concept of anonymity to suggest the 'immortality of an idea' rhetoric of *V for Vendetta*. It also uses its anonymity for offence by striking fear in those they deem as enemies, and defence, in that if one should fall an untold many will remain or fill the vacant space, but also that it is impossible to single out an individual. With V as the aesthetic model, the anonymity afforded by the Guy Fawkes mask enables navigating complex liminal spaces in spectral terms. As Markus Oppolzer argues in 'Gothic Liminality in *V for Vendetta*', V exists so physically and legally outside the dominant system that he is a 'ghostlike presence' in a complex liminal socio-political space, partially of his own choosing (2015). Using networked spectrality to read the content of the *How to join Anonymous* video changes the ideas of multiplicity, non-forgiveness, vengeance, and threat that make up the Anonymous logo and slogan to be more evocative of the themes of haunting: 'We are Anonymous. We are Legion. We do not forgive. We do not forget. Expect us'.

**‘We are Legion. We do not forgive. We do not forget. Expect us’: Digital Aesthetics of Haunting and Networked Spectrality**

As image elements that are mostly readily available, it is important to note that the person reading the address in the *How to Join Anonymous* video is probably not providing the actual audio. Similarly, in the *Message to the Citizens of the World* (ongoing) videos and other recent Anonymous videos, the image elements are effectively static with only the audio and the media clips changing from video to video. As a series of image elements, much like Anonymous itself as a free-floating signifier, a video could be made to serve practically *any* content. In this relative open participation, Anonymous is like Slender Man in that basically anyone can contribute Slender stories, although technically Knudsen retains a limited copyright. But the collective process of negotiating Slender’s aesthetic nevertheless reinforces ideas of collaboration, participation, and viral circulation, all traits that also apply to Anonymous.

Malleable as the audio and inserted news media or popular or cult media clips are, the image elements are comparatively static in a register of fear. The visual aesthetics evident in *Message to Scientology* and *How to join Anonymous* are ominous but the content helps enforce those tones. Contemporary Anonymous image elements do not leave much room at the aesthetic level for interpretations other than fear, and are thus dissociated from the content. Part of the reason is because of the predominance of the glitch aesthetic as a prevailing aesthetic in visual horror media, as discussed in the introduction). Recent Anonymous videos are dominated by a glitch aesthetic, a prominent factor in Anonymous’ overarching digital aesthetic of haunting.

My analysis of the most recent aesthetic choices in Anonymous videos focus on *Anonymous – Message to the Citizens of the World V* (2016). The video, posted September 4, 2016, was the most recent video when I began writing about Anonymous and my first point of contact with Anonymous' digital aesthetic of haunting. There are several videos collected into an ongoing series under the grandiose title *Messages to the Citizens of the World*. The aesthetics are consistent throughout the series, but are also representative of prior videos and videos uploaded since. There are variations on the themes and aesthetics I discuss, but consistent elements like the logo, intro and outro cues, colour palettes, and the predominance of glitch-aesthetics and digital distortion support my claims for an overarching, collective aesthetic, partially internally regulated for consistency, maximum impact and fear factor.

The *Message to the Citizens of the World* series begin with a specific sound cue and display of the logo. Recent Anonymous videos have adopted a new, more ominous, introduction of the logo element. The colour palette has darkened from washed-out greens to blacks and purples, contrasted with flashes of white. The new logo introduction depicts a spinning globe motif but the globe contains a multitude of faceless suits (see *Figure 4.13*). As the outro cue makes more clear, the positioning of the faceless multitude is revealed as the image pulls back to indicate the composition of the logo branches. Comprised of a faceless multitude amidst a black, purple and white colour palette with an ominous sound cue, the branches are less suggestive of peace. As an aesthetic comparison consider the pullback shot of the mass of writhing arms that engulf Maddie (Kristen Bell) in *Pulse* as discussed in chapter one.





Figure 4.13 *Images of the 'spinning globe' motif and the logo composed of a multitude of faceless suits in Anonymous' videos c2015-2017 (Anonymous – Message to the Citizens of the World V, 2016).*

The style of address of the video is consistent with previous Anonymous videos, especially as a continuation of the *V for Vendetta* style. There is still a single, masked presenter, wearing a dark hooded jacket or robe, whose voice is digitally distorted, directly addressing the camera/audience. But what is clearly identifiable as a person in a mask reading an address in *How to Join Anonymous* (see *Figure 4.10*) has become a ghostly, distorted figure, digitally white against an almost black background, more recognizable as a digital special effect than a person (see *Figures 4.14 -4.17*).



*Figure 4.14 Digital effects cast the white of the Guy Fawkes mask into high contrast with the dark black and purple background (Anonymous – Message to the Citizens of the World V, 2016).*



Figure 4.15 The positive and negative values have been reversed in this image with digital effects (Anonymous – Message to the Citizens of the World V, 2016).



Figure 4.16 An example of Anonymous use of glitch aesthetics and pixilation (Anonymous – Message to the Citizens of the World V, 2016).



*Figure 4.17 An example of Anonymous' technique of layering multiple visual components. This image includes a motif of cascading green code in the background and evident on the Guy Fawkes mask (Anonymous – Message to the Citizens of the World V, 2016).*

While digital distortion elements are evident in the *How to join Anonymous* video, they have evolved in *Message to the Citizens of the World V* to be much more sinister. The video includes the horizontal distortion elements, but there is now a vertical distortion element in the form of cascading digital code (see *Figure 4.17*). Here is another direct reference to *The Matrix*. In the film, the green code vertically cascading down the black screen is one means of visualising the technical neuro-simulation as it actually is rather than the dream world version that most people experience as their daily, plugged-in lives. The video uses the primary thematic concerns of *The Matrix* which questions the relationship between the real and the

technologically simulated (Baudrillard's work *Simulacra and Simulation* was an inspiration and intertext of the film), but it also strongly indicates the recurring trope of haunting Jeffrey Sconce (2000) observes as being transmitted from the 'electronic elsewhere'.

The aesthetics, reinforced by the colour palette, the digital distortion, and glitches, vividly suggest this message is being delivered from an electronic elsewhere, perhaps stylised to suggest that it is coming from the Internet itself, or as a communique from the spectral Anonymous End Boss of the Internet. The aesthetic is remarkably like many representations of ghosts discussed in this thesis from the translucent filmic special effects in *Ghost* (1990), to the digital phantoms in *Pulse* (2006) and *Unfriended* (2015). I argue that as an amalgamation of popular and cultural film references, each with their own available gothic themes, Anonymous' intentional aesthetic is clearly spectral, with a direct relationship to digital new media technologies. In short, the aesthetic is specifically that of networked spectrality.

### **Networked Spectrality: Participatory, Organic, Social**

In their recent book-length study on Slender Man, Chess and Newsom find, as I do, that Slender and Anonymous share a 'similar iconography' (2015, p. 11). Indeed, removing the globe from the background of the Anonymous logo leaves a figure in a black suit with a question mark for a head. Reconfigured as the product of an aesthetics of haunting, the branches from the logo become Slender Man's tentacles (see *Figure 4.8*). With the added context of the glitch aesthetic and its direct association with the spectral, as examples of networked spectrality, Slender Man and

Anonymous can be understood as contributing a social context to new media hauntings which intentionally blur the line between mediation and lived social experience, cultural product and community.

Chess and Newsom interpret Slender Man as connected to ‘anxieties old—patriarchy, masculinity, facelessness and the uncanny, transition to adulthood, the boundaries of civilization and the wild—and new—surveillance and self-surveillance culture, privacy, and electronic legacies’ (2015, p. 11). Social anxieties drove (and continue to drive) the moral panic in the wake of the Slender Stabbings, and Anonymous’ operations of digital disruption have material and social ramifications which cause anxieties about its political motives and the extent of its geopolitical power. Both intentionally problematize the on and offline divide as part of their digital aesthetic of haunting.

A networked spectrality approach to Slender and Anonymous offers an alternative to the anxiety model and readings that do not look past the postmodern occult, by considering the social implication of communities that are actively generating content in a register and aesthetic of haunting. Both utilize aesthetics and themes from popular and cult film references, both are transmedia in scope and reach, both suggest complex identity work around the concepts of anonymity, collective creativity, and participation and both have incorporated aspects of the postmodern occult as core thematic values and as an aesthetic, but use those themes and aesthetics as contexts to collapse, material to remix, knowing nods or suggestive foils.

Recast in terms of networked spectrality Anonymous is a malicious Legion of an untold size, ‘more than anyone thinks’ (*Anonymous – How to Join Anonymous*,

2015); multiple and nodular, operating without a central leader or figurehead. This 'destablising multiplicity' (Fish, 2017) utilises the Internet to infiltrate the technical structures of society and cause disruption from afar, then brings secrets of the past to light in the form of e-mails, financial information, personal or corporate data. The multitude is unseen, immaterial, virtual; and yet also highly visible in their Guy-Fawkes mask anonymity, shrouded in mystique and fear. The spectral multiplicities of Slender and Anonymous lurk unseen and highly visible everywhere there is Internet use, causing distress to both virtual and lived social experience.

Slender and Anonymous intentionally self-style on popular and cult films that contain highly gothic themes and aesthetics. Anonymous' fear factor in the new media attention economy is directly related to its sanctioned brand of visual aesthetics and themes that have been refined from *V for Vendetta* and *The Matrix*. Aesthetics and themes like wearing a mask, having an avatar/pseudonym, resisting and toppling tyranny, vigilantism and revenge become explicitly spectral through Anonymous' specific and intentional use of glitch-aesthetics to further its digital aesthetic of haunting.

Likewise, built into Slender Man's very origins are the reflection of Internet saturation and viral transmission. Slender's domain is the entirety of the Internet and all the points of contact, from the person that writes Slender stories in her journal, to the kids that attempt murder in his name, to the academics who publish about him. I consider Slender's powers reflections of the omnipresence of digital networks in contemporary social life. His tentacles, his featureless face, his nonspecific, menacing but also alluring presence in time and space, and his irresistibility, are all important factors of user experiences of digitally networked media.

Anonymous shares revenge as a primary motivation with traditional ghosts (Briggs, 1977), and strives to be a capable vigilante, eager to overthrow any tyrannies it deems unjust. But unlike traditional ghosts that abide by an ‘illogical logic’ of supernatural cause and effect, Slender and Anonymous cannot be pacified. Tina Marie Boyer considers Slender a ‘prohibitive monster’ (2013, p. 246), but the means of crossing Slender are arbitrary, being neither apparent or necessarily consistent. In a similar vein, Anonymous does not forget or forgive. Instead Anonymous and Slender are ever-present: expect us. Read as examples of networked spectrality, the scope and scale of Slender and Anonymous are the entirety of the digital network, haunting the net through constant presence *and* absence, easily using the division between virtuality and anonymity, and materiality and social norms, for both offence and defence.

I argue that in appropriating and negotiating cult and popular horror conventions into a recognisable digital aesthetic of haunting, Slender and Anonymous deliberately utilise fear as the primary means of generating attention and aggrandizing their own social and geopolitical mystique. Following this assertion, Anonymous’ propaganda PR videos can be understood as emboldening their supporters and instilling fear amongst those they consider enemies. A similar claim can be extended to Slender, especially in the context of the moral panic around the Slender Stabbing case. Coleman’s observations about the ‘bold and recognizable aesthetics’, ‘participatory openness’, and the surrounding misinformation and unpredictability of Anonymous (2013, p. 3) can also be applied to Slender Man. As a product of the same affordances of networked publics, Slender taps into similar themes and viral distribution through its emphasis on collaborative creativity.



Slender and Anonymous certainly stir social fears, but behind these social phenomena are communities that are actively using the language and aesthetics of haunting, negotiated from popular and cult cultural products, for specific ends. Some of those ends are collective collaboration, artistic integrity, and a deep enjoyment of experiencing haunting and being afraid. Slender Man and Anonymous communities use fear as a tool in the new media attention economy for their own socio-political ends, but also for their enjoyment and collective expression. I use networked spectrality to read the themes of new media haunting in Slender and Anonymous as participatory and enduring in creative, political and social terms. As such, Slender Man and Anonymous represent a change of flow from culturally sanctioned production, like a film's production designer, to more organic collaborative creativity.

As film and television cultural products, the other texts collected in this thesis are evidently fiction. Like most traditional ghost stories, they depict a naturalistic setting that is disrupted by the supernatural. Anonymous, on the other hand is self-styled on an assortment of cultural products that include gothic and haunting themes and has social and political ramifications in lived social experience. Likewise, Slender has breached the divide between the virtual and the real. Both have incorporated social fears around the postmodern occult; both also reaffirm a factor that Marc Olivier identifies as distinguishing twenty-first century media horror from its predecessors: 'not the fear that new media will absorb its user into an incorporeal digisphere, but the dreaded prospect that it cannot. The message of the glitch is that there is no escape from materiality' (Olivier, 267). Persistent themes in new media hauntings are enduring, constant threats, terrorism, problematic grief, scarcity of resources, tyrannical governments abusing their power and overstepping their reach;

but haunting can also be a source of entertainment, creative expression, a joke for the lulz; by and for a community that want to experience haunting this way. New media hauntings inherit both these drives when they take on a social context.

An awareness of material conditions is precisely what helps enable new media hauntings. As examples of organic, communal, social phenomena that are actively using themes and aesthetics of haunting for specific ends, contemporary iterations of the theme of haunting include an important social context. Using a specifically cultivated digital aesthetic of haunting, Slender Man and Anonymous can be understood as targeting the distinction between on and offline as the subject of haunting. Lived social experience becomes the setting of new media ghost stories in which the aesthetics of cult and popular cultural products are appropriated and remixed to further the sense of fear as a real social context. In such a way, Slender and Anonymous are changing how contemporary ghosts are being imagined and depicted. They are the glitching, distorted pixilated featureless faces of the haunted and haunting Internet. Slender and Anonymous are both normalizing an experience of fear and haunting online through a digital aesthetic of haunting, and there is an active community that participates in, spreads, jokes about, and deeply enjoys just such an experience.

**Chapter Five – Networked Spectrality as Challenge to Neoconservatism in *CSI: Cyber***

Anonymous and Slender Man suggest a participatory and social context to new media hauntings. Such deliberate and participatory blurring of the on and offline in a register of haunting is a factor in the continuing cultural association between data and spectrality. The spectral character of new media technologies has become so pervasive in the cultural imagination that texts which otherwise appear to resist such associations do not so easily escape the spectral. The television crime drama *CSI: Cyber* (2015-2016) does not feature any ghosts and does not engage with the theme of haunting as such, instead depicting new media technologies as sites of fear, vulnerability and the latest means of committing crimes. As with the other cultural products considered in this thesis, *Cyber* depicts new media technologies as hypervisible and thoroughly socially and culturally integrated, but the expression of the cultural tensions surrounding such technologies is not in the ambiguous, spectral, terms of the ghost story. Rather, *Cyber* presents a neoconservative political approach toward the role technology should play in contemporary policing and surveillance; one that dispels cultural attitudes about haunted media and the supernatural with secular rationality in the form of highly skilled scientific investigation and police work.

*CSI: Cyber* is the latest iteration of the popular American television franchise *CSI: Crime Scene Investigators* but where the original *CSI* (2000-2015), and spin offs *CSI: Miami* (2002-2012), and *CSI: NY* (2004-2014) emphasize the role of forensic science in solving crimes, *Cyber* foregrounds contemporary new media technologies. Due to the global scale of cybercrime, the Cyber team operate as part of the Federal

Bureau of Investigation (F.B.I.) giving them national jurisdiction and widening the scope of the programme's premise. Like prior *CSI* programme models, *Cyber* focuses on a team of experts centred around a leading protagonist. Although not credited in every televised episode, real-life cyber psychologist Mary Akin is an important inspiration and producer of *CSI: Cyber*, and her involvement helps shift the focus of the programme towards new media technologies.

As the programme's introductory preamble explains, when working as a psychologist, Avery Ryan's (Patricia Arquette) confidential client files were hacked and distributed online resulting in the murder of one of her patients. Her pursuit of the hacker led to her joining the F.B.I. Cyber Division working with Assistant Department Director Simon Sifter (Peter MacNicol). The show dramatizes the judicial practice of recruiting 'black hat' hackers that have been caught to harness their knowledge in conjunction with 'white hat' computer technicians to help solve cybercrimes. The team's resident white hat hacker, Daniel "Krummy" Krumitz (Charley Koontz), joins reformed black hat Raven Ramirez (Hayley Kiyoko) and recent black hat recruit Brody "Qu35t" (Quest) Nelson (Shad Moss). The core team for season one is rounded out by former Marine Elijah Mundo (James Van Der Beek) in the role of 'the muscle'. Operating out of Baltimore, Maryland and Washington D.C. the cyber division investigates all types of cybercrime, nationwide.

In its promised depiction of the contemporary perils of new media technologies, *Cyber* appears strikingly similar to many other technophobic examples of new media hauntings collected in this thesis, especially the more overt, bombastic visual productions like *Pulse* (2006) and *Unfriended* (2015) (as compared to the subtler production values and tones of *Black Mirror*, 2011 - ). My argument, that

some of the functionality traditionally performed by a ghost is being transferred to hackers in contemporary narratives, is bolstered by the topical visual special effects employed by *Cyber*. But the use of a similar visual aesthetic that tends to signal the spectral in depictions of new media hauntings, is mobilised in *Cyber* as an attempt to *dispel* the supernatural as an appropriate context through which to read the programme. The distinction between black and a white hat hackers reveal the emphasis of neoconservative police procedure and suggest a dominant reading of reassurance.

In *Cyber* the killer is always caught, justice is always served, the technological crime is solved by proficient ‘white hat’ users of similar technologies. There are some further, distinctly American, neoconservative implications about this depiction of justice, technology and the State. The format of the programme dramatizes the real life political exchange that surrounds justice, surveillance, etc. (and the role technology plays in these factors) – the exchange of personal liberty for social security. While the crimes depicted on the programme are facilitated with technology, technology is also an important factor (along with the visual aesthetics, police work, evidence, the muscle/chasing suspects down, specialist knowledge etc.) in their solution. The episodes situate fear, crime and death in new media technologies, but a techno-political surveillance theatre restores order, and safety and thereby justifies the continued and even expanding security theatre.

Each *Cyber* episode revolves around a death, murder or crime. Several episodes explore the themes of risk, fear, anonymity, cyberbullying, mediated persistence after death and the predominant use of digital new media technologies in daily life that would seem to indicate grounds for a networked spectrality

approach, except for the programme's attempted disavowal and redirection of such themes into neoconservative political ideology. The generic identity of *Cyber* is not a ghost story, yet, the depiction of the work of investigation, the centrality of the past toward the resolution, the predominance of the corpse as crucial source of evidence, and scholarship that considers the spectral implications of such 'traces', suggest the grounds for a networked spectraliy approach to *Cyber*.

Where the tendency is for new media hauntings to endure in the examples explored in this thesis thus far, *Cyber* depicts a team of State-sanctioned experts who rationalise and sanitise social fears around technology by always solving the cybercrime. This is in keeping with scholastic comments which identify the complex political implications of such assured depictions of the beneficent role of technology in social life, governance and policing. Both prominent scholastic collections, *Reading CSI: Television Under the Microscope* (Allen, 2007) and *The CSI Effect: Television, Crime, Governance* (Byers and Marie Johnson, 2009) consider the franchise a specifically produced, stylized, formulaic, commercially driven cultural product that tends to endorse neoliberalism.

Neoliberal political ideology emerges from the progressive shifting of social responsibility and services that were once provided by the welfare state to the individual. New media technologies overwhelmingly enable and reinforce neoliberal ideologies on a global scale. Neoconservatism reinvigorates and reenergizes moral attitudes toward the state. Although the neoliberal and neoconservative ideologies appear at odds Wendy Brown finds they converge at specific points and bolster one another: 'the moralism, statism, and authoritarianism of neoconservatism are profoundly enabled by neoliberal rationality' (2006, p. 702).

*Cyber's* widening of scope to focus on new media technologies helps clarify how neoliberalism and neoconservatism are related, while confirming *Cyber* as more emblematic of neoconservative ideologies. In previous iterations of the *CSI* franchise, the leading male agent, with the help of his team, but also off the strength of his personal skills and conviction, can suggest hope for a broken, crime-ridden world in the span of a 50-minute television programme. 'If crime and risk are impossible to mitigate; if lawyers and the police (and thus in some capacity the state) have failed, *CSI* tells us that we are left with the truth of the body, a truth that can only be discovered by objective forensic scientists under the guidance of the father figures of Gil Grissom, Horation Caine, and Mac Taylor' (Byers and Marie Johnson, 2009, p. xv). Grissom, Caine and Taylor are the male protagonists of each previous *CSI* iteration and it is through the 'forensic heroism' (Byers and Marie Johnson's, 2009, p. xvii) of these men that the weekly fears about crime are contained.

In *Cyber*, Avery Ryan fills this role offering a much-needed injection of female representation in a main role for the franchise. Much more could be said about the complex gender politics of the franchise and what Academy Award Winner Patricia Arquette (as she is billed in the promotional materials) might bring, and might be expected to bring to the latest iteration of the franchise. One point of interest is how a female protagonist experiences being a victim (the whole plot of season one revolves around Ryan's files being hacked), stereotypes about women being more emotional, and accessing a 'woman's intuition', and the added seemingly unrelated context of Ryan's family life including her role as carer for a mentally ill sibling, and importantly, her role as a mother. In terms of neoconservatism, it is not the change of the main protagonist's gender, however, that shapes the moral, ideological and

political stance of *Cyber* so much as the programmes change of focus from the depiction of corpse as ‘evidential fetish’ (Turkel, 2009), to the depiction of hypervisible technology in service of an opaque, state-controlled digital media ecology of surveillance and security.

The *CSI* franchise programme model both stirs generalised fears about crime and depicts a justice system capable of solving ‘crime’ in the abstract sense. But the shift in *Cyber* from an emphasis on forensic science being applied to specific, local crime scenes, to the national jurisdiction of the Cyber team, and the changing dynamics and scale of cybercrimes, positions *Cyber* to make neoconservative political claims about the role technology should play in keeping American citizens safe and secure. Although the cybercrimes are solved week after week, the cultural reassurance the program depicts can be challenged through a networked spectrality reading. A networked spectrality approach to *CSI: Cyber* reveals the troubling direction and intention of State regulation of new media technologies, the widespread breaches of privacy by the State and the problems associated with such depictions of neoconservative political ideologies.

Due to the highly formulaic nature of the *CSI* format, and because I am using the show instrumentally to explore how networked spectrality works in a text that mostly resists a supernatural reading, I am curtailing my focus to season one. I address the main, reoccurring characters as they are most commonly referred to in the programme: Shifter, Ryan, Mundo, Nelson, Kumitz, Raven. When describing characters in individual episodes I use the character’s first name, or how they are commonly addressed throughout the episode. Three episodes bear thematic



similarities to other texts covered in this thesis, ‘S1 Ep 4: Fire Code’, ‘S1 Ep 6: The Evil Twin’, and ‘S1 Ep 13: Family Secrets’.

‘Fire Code’ deliberately dispels the supernatural as a means of reading the programme by cultivating stylistic similarities to the horror genre but using police procedure to solve the crime rather than a spectral context. In its self-styling in the tonal registrar of a horror film, and its inclusion of a masked hacker, it is comparable to *Pulse* and *Anonymous* (discussed in chapters one and four respectively). But for all the suggested similarities, ‘Fire Code’ is not an example of new media haunting themes, but affirms a neoconservative ideology that the State can contain even threats that appear spectral in character. Due to a character seeming to live on past her death through digital means, ‘Evil Twin’ has thematic links to the ‘Be Right Back’ episode of *Black Mirror*, discussed in chapter three. A networked spectrality approach reveals ‘Evil Twin’ as the most striking example of how digital evidence can appear spectral in the programme. The past is of the utmost concern as the name of the season one finale, ‘Family Secrets’ suggests.

Through the course of the ‘Family Secrets’ episode it is revealed that Ryan has suffered the personal trauma of the death of her daughter, Hannah (also revisited in season two, episode fifteen: ‘Python’s Revenge’, 2016). While I do not do a stand-alone analysis of ‘Family Secrets’, I draw important points from it to bolster my overall argument. Specifically, I consider the reveal of Hannah’s death in the season one finale a factor that renders her ghostly at the narrative and plot level, a context that haunts all the prior episodes. A close analysis of ‘Fire Code’ and ‘Evil Twin’ exemplify how a networked spectrality reading of can problematize the dominant reading of *Cyber* as a neoconservative police procedural, and indicate how the

themes traditionally allocated to ghosts and hauntings are taken up by hackers, the State and the spectral associations of the affordances that govern the technology itself.

### **From Neoliberalism to Neoconservatism to New Media Hauntings?**

*Cyber* has two considerably different introductory segments. Each plays in its entirety every episode, and each contributes to the visual aesthetics and ideological bent of the *Cyber* iteration of the *CSI* franchise. Because they topically illustrate the tension between fear and reassurance, a close reading helps establish the programme's dominant neoconservative ideology that my networked spectrality analysis subverts throughout this chapter. I call the first of these the 'it can happen to you' pre-credit sequence. I consider the direct address and the association of the viewer with a lurker in the machine a deliberate effort to structure the viewing experience in a tonal register of fear. After about ten minutes and the first commercial break comes the programme's standard opening title sequence which introduces the cast of characters and all the *Cyber* logo branding. I call this the 'I can see for miles' credit sequence because The Who song of that name provides the theme music:

I know you've deceived me, now here's a surprise

I know that you have 'cause there's magic in my eyes

I can see for miles and miles and miles and miles and miles (Townsend, 1967)

These lyrics could reference a romantic break up and/or psychedelic drug use, but when coupled with icons of American nationalism (the American flag, the Washington Monument, the Lincoln Memorial), agents in F.B.I. body armour, flashy

crime-solving technologies on display, depicted in a highly stylized digital aesthetic, the extraordinary vision alluded to in the song point towards the neoconservative ideologies of assurance rather than fear guaranteed by the technical surveillance of the State.

The visuals of the technology-saturated pre-credit introduction play while Arquette narrates the following dialogue:

My name is Avery Ryan. I was a victim of cybercrime. Like you, I posted on social media, checked my bank account balance online, even kept the confidential files of my psychological practice on my computer. Then I was hacked, and as a result one of my patients was murdered. My investigation into her death lead me to the F.B.I., where I joined a team of cyber experts, to wage a war against a new breed of criminal hiding on the deep web, infiltrating our daily lives in ways we never imagined. Faceless. Nameless. Lurking inside our devices – just a keystroke away. It can happen to you...  
(‘Pre-credit sequence, 2015).

Arquette whispers the last lines as they appear to be typed into the blackness of a would-be computer monitor.

The construction of the opening image of Agent Ryan suggests a stylistic inversion of the familiar user experience of interacting with a computer screen. The viewer watches from the vantage of the computer Ryan is using, a subject position which I read as including the viewer among the unseen lurkers in the device. The web-cam perspective as a visual technique is commonplace as digital media are being translated as the subject of other visual media, especially television and film. Similar visual styles are evident in nearly all the texts collected in this thesis. But in

*Cyber* the audience are also invited to recognise themselves as users of the same technologies through Ryan's direct address and the subject position from which they view: 'like you', 'it can happen to you'. A relationship between Ryan and the audience is specifically cultivated through the associations of the common activities of posting on social media and online banking.

But the introduction goes on to trouble the viewer's taken-for-granted use of new media technologies, signalling the dangers of new, digitally anonymous criminals operating in a zone and through a means of power that viewer's depend on and trust as a part of their daily lives. The threat of the deep web is evoked specifically as a site and source of fear in a similar register as other new media hauntings examples considered in this thesis such as the technical middle of the network depicted in *Pulse* and the cloud as spectral place the ghost presides over in *Unfriended*, as I address in chapters one and two respectively. To drive home the new and supposedly digitally untraceable dangers of cybercriminals, the introduction depicts the graphical representation of a facial recognition database failing to identify the perpetrator. The would-be face is pixilated and distorted to visually depict the failure of the database query and the unknowability of this new digital threat.



*Figure 5.1 The depiction of supposedly untraceable, nameless, faceless cyber criminals in CSI: Cyber is also suggestive of Anonymous' use of the Guy Fawkes mask ('Pre-credit sequence', 2015).*

*Cyber* uses images like *Figure 5.1* to depict themes of anonymity and specific digital aesthetics as a locus of fear. The image is reminiscent of both Anonymous and the digital aesthetic of haunting the collective specifically cultivates for their own socio-political ends, commented upon in chapter four. As I discuss in my 'Fire Code' analysis in this chapter, the signature visual aesthetics of *Cyber* are *not* intended to signal a new media haunting. Rather, I argue that Anonymous is being evoked as a free-floating signifier of contemporary collective fears surrounding new media technologies, but also to defang, belittle, sanitize and demonstrate that even the notorious Anonymous is a containable 'villain' by the beneficent and capable F.B.I Cyber team.

The final scene of the pre-credit introduction sequence returns to the opening focus on Ryan but drives home the position of the viewer as ‘lurker’ in the machine as an overlay of a webcam, embedded in the laptop-like screen the audience watches from (see Figure 5.2). The screen then goes black as white letters seem to type: ‘it can happen to you...’, again making a direct association between the viewing audience and an encounter with technology in a general, stylized register of fear, risk and danger. As mentioned, watching from the perspective of the screen is utilized in *Pulse*, *Unfriended*, and *Black Mirror* (‘History of You’, ‘White Christmas’) and indicates some complex similarities via the aesthetics, stylization and tone to some Anonymous missives.

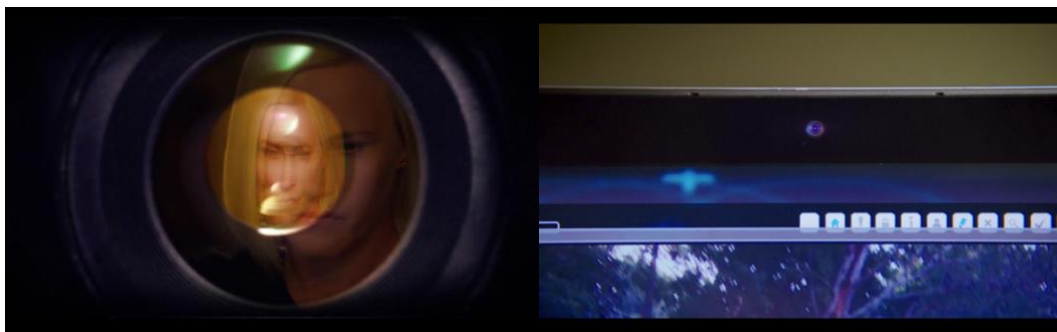


Figure 5.2 *The pre-credit sequence cultivates a ‘lurker in the device’ motif which is borne out in the narrative season one finale ‘Family Secrets’ where it is revealed that Ryan has been being watched all this time (‘Pre-credit sequence’, 2015; ‘Family Secrets’, 2015).*

The ‘Family Secrets’ episode reveals that it is also the perspective from which Ryan’s hacker, Logan Reeve’s watches. The plot of how Ryan’s computer came to be infected by Logan is an important point in my networked spectrality analysis that reads his infecting Ryan’s computer with a RAT (remote access Trojan) to watch from

this vantage as a type of technologically aided haunting. This visual perspective comes to position Logan, and the audience as not just lurkers in the device, but the embodiment of the ghost in the machine trope. This furthers my argument that, as a contemporary trope that seems to mimic new media hauntings, hackers are performing the work attributed to traditional ghosts and occurrences of haunting. The effect of this perspective, including its cultural associations with the horror and found footage genres, is to garner fear. It demonstrates the tension between situating new media technologies as the seat of fear, but also setting up that fear as able to be rationalised, contained and 'solved' by the highly skilled agents of the State. This dominant reading is more clearly expressed in the regular credit introduction where the programme's focus on new media technologies is still evident, but is structured by equally hypervisible emblems of nationalism.

From the teaser to the title introduction, the programme presents the hook, the crime and some minimal character development. Often it allows Patricia Arquette to look into a victim's eyes, and the viewer's eyes by extension and offer reassurance in some variation of the phrase: 'my name is Avery Ryan, I'm a federal investigator and I'm going to solve this case — I'm going to get baby Caleb back' ('Kidnapping 2.0'); 'I'm going to find the person that caused this crash' ('CMND:Crash'); 'If I'm right about this, this fire was not an accident, it was arson' ('Fire Code'). Technology is depicted as hypervisible in the programme, and enriched graphics highlight the investigative process, revealing a finger print, or cleaning or soldering a microchip – graphics suggesting through post-production effects that the map is not just a map but contains important metadata that the Cyber team and viewers at home can read. These are the tools that in the hands of the capable CSI

agent demonstrate the rational over the supernatural. In *Cyber*, Agent Ryan appears to dispel the supernatural in two ways: through her training as a psychologist, and an unwavering faith in evidence as a source of truth. Ryan can get a read on suspects hidden behavioural clues because of her prior psychologist training.

The focus on evidence is also an important point because, rather than from an electronic elsewhere, or a supernatural agent (as in *Pulse*), the Cyber team extract data from the burned printers, the encoded IP addresses, and videos uploaded to the internet, in addition to reading suspects. 'What in previous detective drama has been dealt with in psychoanalytic terms of repression and displacement, in forensic television is objectified in material trace' (Panse, 2007, p. 157). But just as the structural affordances of networked publics have reinforced the spectral character of new media technologies in the cultural imagination, the prioritization of depicting the past as material trace does not so easily shrug off associations with the spectral. The process by which a CSI can be considered doing the work of exorcism depends on rationality which is frequently shown not only dispelling elements of the supernatural but also the changing interpretations of the emotive and psychoanalytic.

The dominant reading of *CSI: Cyber* employs a highly stylised visual aesthetic to highlight the exceptional police work of a dedicated team working to keep people safe. The Cyber team collect evidence and read traces, not ghosts. Science and skill rectify the past, not haunting. Technology is prominent, but haunting is not (supposed to be). The programme is trying to cultivate a specific social and political mode that ultimately justifies a type of neoconservative, technologically enriched and enabled surveillance and security theatre. A networked spectrality approach to



*Cyber* helps reveal the central tension between new media technologies depicted as sites of fear and crime that ‘can happen to you’, and the reassurance guaranteed by an expansive State-sanctioned security and surveillance theatre that can ‘see for miles and miles’. The Cyber team may foil the elaborate and implausible plots of cybercriminals that the pre-credit introduction sequence warns can happen to the viewing public, but a networked spectrality reading helps reveal that that the technological reach of the State can be equally frightening. Such a reading challenges the dominant interpretation the programme attempts to cultivate in ‘Fire Code’ through an active disavowal of spectrality and themes of haunting.

#### **‘Fire Code’ as Disavowal of Haunted Media**

The ‘Fire Code’ episode features the most evident, most sustained, stylistic similarities to a horror film and shares many traits with several other cultural products included in this thesis. Due to similarities with *Pulse*, it seems like the most logical place to consider a networked spectrality approach but in the episode’s tidy neoconservative conclusion in which the Cyber team solve the crime, the programme actively disavows spectrality and haunting as intended thematic contexts. It is common for television occasionally to use narrative and aesthetic techniques from other genres, adjusting the programming tone to accommodate holidays or major sporting events. A Halloween episode can temporarily don the guise of a horror film or ghost story, but *Cyber* was springtime programming and ‘Fire Code’ originally aired 25 March, 2015.

The episode’s adoption of horror film themes and visual tropes, coupled with numerous characters discussing the fires in terms of a poltergeist as a plot point of

the narrative, indicates the deliberate use of horror and the ghost story mode. I argue that the episode's topical concern with haunting evokes the supernatural to specifically dispel it as the dominant means of reading the portrayal of technology on the programme. Although a networked spectrality approach seems applicable, police procedure takes over from the supernatural as a matter of course. While police procedure and the neoconservative ideology the episode implies appear to win the day, a networked spectrality reading based on an analysis of 'Evil Twin' and considering the significant reveals in 'Family Secrets' problematizes the whole narrative arc of season one.

In 'Fire Code' the Cyber team investigate a rash of fires that are caused by a firmware update to a popular printer that deactivates the temperature settings causing it to overheat and catch the paper in the tray on fire. Because the fires are set remotely, with no evident cause, the episode initially attributes them to the paranormal activities of poltergeists. But the Cyber team eventually trace the origins of the code through a low-level informant, through the imbedded IP addresses of a pyromaniac and a revenge arsonist, to the true culprit, JU5TU5 (Justice), a deep web hacker who is threatening to trigger the exploit on a massive scale. Described as a professional torch, in an untraceable video, the extent of JU5TU5's plot is revealed: he targeted users he knew would use the code to raise public awareness of the exploit so that the very popular electronics company, PE (Public Electric), would pay him 10 million dollars to avoid having their printers and computers set an untold amount of fires nationwide.

As the most recent former black hat hacker, Nelson appears to turn on the team when it is revealed that he was an early architect of the exploit. Adding to this,

JU5TU5 is a friend Nelson never gave up during his arrest and the proceedings of his case. Nelson has not gone rogue but is trying to reform his friend, as Avery is attempting to reform him. The episode resolves when JU5TU5 snubs Nelson's efforts to convince him to turn himself in and steals Nelson's old flash drive full of exploits from his black hat days. Anticipating this, Nelson attaches a tracking device to the flash drive, leading to the capture of his former friend, who, as Ryan suggests, will be taught the true meaning of the word 'justice'. In his confrontation with JU5TU5, Nelson renounces his hacker reputation for 'one that I'm proud of': F.B.I. agent and member of the Cyber team.

'Fire Code' opens with solemn church bells chiming in the night over America's heartland. The scene settles into what appears to be an ordinary apartment. The coffee pot switches on but there is no mug to catch the liquid. Is it morning, the start of a new day? Now the TV switches on, perhaps also on a timer? An alarm switches on, reassuring viewers momentarily that it is just a normal morning routine, until the numbers on the alarm clock start cycling through all the numbers! A blonde young woman fumbles for a pair of glasses before frantically running downstairs. She turns off the TV, but it flickers back on as if by itself and begins flipping through the channels. The stereo comes on blaring, but then it all goes suddenly, quiet. When the befuddled victim turns to go back upstairs, she notices an eerie light visible from under her roommate's door. Who, or what is behind the door...?

The audio and visual aesthetics, including the tone, pacing, music and the fact that the blonde victim wields a kitchen knife, intentionally evoke horror film and new media haunting conventions and are reminiscent of establishing scenes in *Scream*

(1996), *The Ring* (2002) and sections of *Pulse* (2006). 'Fire Code' is a clear example of the haunting 'electronic presence' Jeffrey Sconce (2000) observes surrounding cultural interpretations of haunted media, as I establish in the introduction and chapter one. Of the three qualities Sconce (2000: 8-9) uses to articulate his conception of 'electronic presence', the anthropomorphising of technology is most prominently on display in the 'Fire Code' introduction. In a programme that has well established visual aesthetics, the fact that the spectral nature of technology is more overtly on display, is significant, as is the fact that the narrative presents spectrality as context of the episode. Ghosts are an explicit context in two ways: the fact the fires are set remotely leads several characters, including the news media, to speculate they were caused by 'poltergeists'; and Nelson's role in the code being developed from his old 'Ghost Print' exploit.

'Fire Code' is directly comparable to *Pulse* because both dramatize the uncanny technical mediation of the spectral via a printer. The ridiculousness of this is not lost on me. The printer is a literal means of translating the central figurative depiction of the ghost as a present absence. A printer mediates ephemeral information into a tangible material object. The thoroughly mundane printer is depicted as haunted media *par excellence* in *Pulse*. After Mattie (Kristin Bell) has had a few unsettling experiences with her computer, she turns the monitor to face the wall (itself a form of anthropomorphising, Sconce, 2000, p.3), and unplugs the printer and computer tower. But the spectral contagion continues to haunt her and her friends, and in a telling scene through the very distinct sonic cue, she is awoken at night to discover her still unplugged printer preparing to print a document. One oddly shaded black and white image prints at a time, until nine individual sheets are

printed. Intuitively, Mattie arranges the sheets into a larger square while the camera pulls back to reveal the distorted, over-blown image of the ghost that has been pursuing her. This scene can also be compared to the fatal game of ‘Never Have I Ever’ in *Unfriended*, in which the ghost of Laura Barns accesses Blaire and Adam’s printers to print two contradicting messages.

As a comparison, these printer scenes are easy to recognise as the pranking Nelson intended when developing the original configuration of the Ghost Print exploit. ‘I called it ‘Ghost Print’, he explains, ‘code for basically hacking into someone’s network and taking control of the printer. Look, I thought it would be a funny prank to play on my friends. Print weird messages – freak ‘em out’. As Ryan gets progressively more frustrated with Nelson, he defends himself saying, ‘I only wrote the code that allowed the intrusion, not the code to set a fire’. The similarities between ‘Ghost Print’ and the central motif of ghosts coming through the Wi-Fi in *Pulse* or as a display of Laura Barns’ spectral digital omnipotence, suggest a networked spectrality approach. Indeed, there are several relevant aspects related to scope, scale, searchability (boyd, 2010a), and distribution. Early in the episode, it is unclear how much the ‘Ghost Print’ exploit has been circulated on the ‘wire’, and in what potentially new, dangerous ways the code may have been altered: It is the return of Nelson’s repressed code, but altered beyond the mostly innocent pranks Nelson intended. A networked spectrality reading pays attention to these elements as aspects of the persistence of the code, its ready availability not just in its original form but also as a base from which to build and distribute other malicious codes.

While these spectral contexts would otherwise imply a networked spectrality reading, especially the trope of ghost printing, the possibility of a spectral reading is

shut down as quickly as it is breached, and at every possible turn to prioritize neoconservative rationality and the capability of the State to contain crime and dispense justice. The scene immediately following the eerie apartment sequence is Mundo chasing down a low-level informant through the bright metropolis set to upbeat, guitar-driven pop music – quite the tonal contrast. Working from code obtained by the informant, Krumitz demonstrates the exploit in a controlled environment for the rest of the team allowing Agent Ryan to mechanically pronounce the plot of the episode:

SHIFTER: Code sent from a computer did all this?' [...]

RYAN: It's terrifying, someone figured out how to set a fire through the internet.

With over 1.5 million susceptible printers Ryan fears the damage any of them could do before the threat is contained. Nelson tries to dodge Ryan's question of scale: 'I shared it on a few forums... but look it was a long time ago! Anyone could have taken my code... and expanded it'. On cue the news breaks a story about another mysterious fire in a community college in Atlanta, Georgia that Raven announces is being attributed to a poltergeist. A shot of the news coverage is presenting the story with the headline 'POSSESSED PRINTERS? NO EXPLANATION FOR COMMUNITY COLLEGE FIRE'. Throughout the whole scene and its movement into the central situation room, is a fear of scale: who has access to the codes? In this way, the threat of multiple iterations of the exploit are reminiscent of the ghost outbreak, expressed in spectral, apocalyptic tones in *Pulse*. *Pulse* associates the spectral contagion that eventually spreads through any technology on the digital network in terms of both a biological virus and a malicious technical virus. But the

trope of ghosts coming through the Wi-Fi in *Pulse* is depicted in *Cyber* in reverse: malicious code is transmitted through the net threatening to affect/infect every user worldwide. As elements of networked spectrality there are similarities in scope and tone.

The threat in *Cyber* is of a similar scale as that in *Pulse*, with national and possibly global implications. But in *Cyber* it is not constructed in the narrative as a supernatural threat for long. Even as Raven says the suspected cause of the fires are poltergeists, she is dismissive. Her performance scoffs at the possibility of the supernatural as it is voiced. It is clear from her reaction that such an explanation is beneath the collective effort of the F.B.I. Ryan also quickly reframes the explanation back into legal procedure: 'The guy we arrested in Louisville is behind bars, THIS is someone new'. The depiction of the scale of fear in 'Fire Code' is reminiscent of the multiple, enduring, distributive depiction of haunting in *Pulse*. *Cyber* operates in a topical visual and narrative appropriation of new media haunting themes, but according to the dominant reading being put forth in the episode, spectrality is contained in the important context of the police procedural.

As I have been broadly arguing in this thesis, networked spectrality considers the spectral and technical mechanics to analyse cultural products that pair the themes of technology and haunting. In a cultural product like *Pulse*, the depiction of technology is bluntly used to reinforce a cautionary tale about technological hubris and ultimately uses the horror of digital ghosts to further a conservative response to the cultural moment of proliferating networked technologies. Because of the broad, blunt stokes evident in the way *Pulse* represents ghosts and technology, part of what a networked spectrality approach can do is pay more specific, more nuanced,

attention to the way spectrality and technology are represented, and what the combination of these elements might indicate about the society producing and consuming such representations. Networked spectrality offers a clear way into analysing *Pulse* because of the relative simplicity of its subject matter and its dominant message. But *Cyber* is not operating in an evident tonal register of spectrality and haunting. In fact, the dominant reading endorses a neoconservative framework that prioritises the rational and scientific over the supernatural and therefore would seem to shut down a networked spectrality approach.

Material evidence that suggests significant digital evidence is read everywhere in *Cyber*, ostensibly always in the context of the police procedural, not the spectral. When Ryan questions the blonde woman from the opening sequence, Stacie (Alison Rood) she refuses to believe the cause of the fire was anything other than arson, despite the victim describing the event in terms of a haunting:

RYAN: You told the investigators you thought the apartment was possessed?

STACIE: Right before the fire, all the appliances suddenly came to life.

RYAN: How elaborate is your Wi-Fi password?

STACIE: Our Wi-Fi...?

RYAN: It's as important as the lock on your front door.

When the roommate, Kate, rather sensibly asks what that has to do with the fire, Ryan waxes police procedural:

RYAN: The evidence shows the fire started inside the printer in the room.

KATE: So it was an electrical fire?

RYAN: More likely a cyber intrusion into your router. [How is a cyber intrusion more likely than an electrical fire?] Without a good password, anyone can



invade your network and access your devices [...] If I'm right about this, this fire was not an accident, it was arson.

Where it would be expected for the tone of the programme to seek a rational rather than supernatural reason, there is no realistic correlation between poltergeists and arson and, importantly, despite the scene being punctuated by flashbacks and stylish inserts that depict an unseen man easily accessing Stacie & Kate's wireless network, there is no obvious connection between arson and new media technologies.

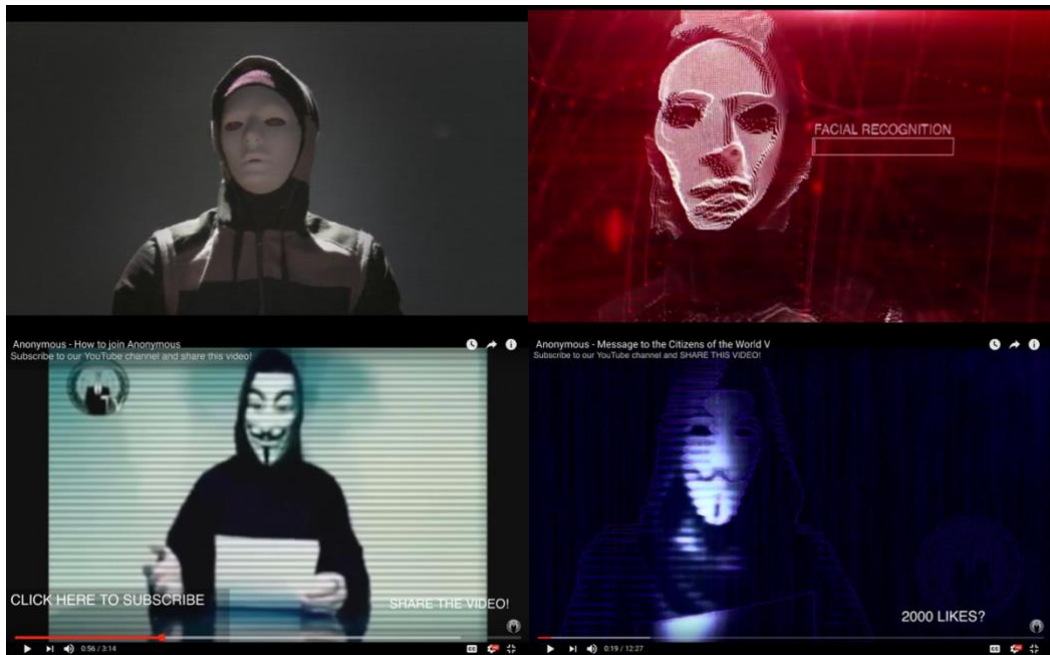
Conversely, there *is* a historical precedent for considering media haunted and even an electric fire is more realistically related to new media technologies.

The second batch of fires are revealed to be caused by a fired IT guy as an act of revenge. Revenge is one of the primal aspects of a ghost, as Briggs writes, '[g]host stories often deal with the most primitive, punitive and sadistic of impulses, revenge being one of the commonest motifs present in the form' (2000, p. 128). In such a way, revenge is often the chief motive of the poltergeist, a particularly malevolent type of usually site-bound ghost. Even the resolution of Ryan's personal traumas in 'Family Secrets' get entwined in the spectral associations of revenge. But, despite the similarly vengeful motives, the perpetrator in 'Fire Code' is not a poltergeist but a man whose IP address was specifically hand-picked and embedded into the code of the exploit by the true master mind behind the fires, JU5TU5.

JU5TU5 claims credit for the zero-day exploit in an untraceable video sent to PE in which he threatens to trigger the vulnerability unless he is paid 10 million dollars. To solidify his threat JU5TU5 says, 'Ignore my request, and I'll post the codes online, and if you do decide to recall all of your printers, be warned, it's not your only device that can burn. You have two hours to comply before PE sets the world on fire'.

The lines and the visual aesthetics of the programme work in tandem to convey the potential danger of the exploit, and while I have already indicated the networked spectrality similarities to scale, it is through the treatment of JU5TU5 as a matter of police procedure that 'Fire Code' consolidates its dominant neoconservative reading.

Through similar visual cues, especially the use of a mask, a hooded figure and topical digital distortion effects, I argue that the JU5TU5 video is *Cyber's* take on Anonymous (see *Figure 5.3*). I detail Anonymous in chapter four where I argue that several of the collective's tactics, imagery, and organizational model specifically employ a digital aesthetic of haunting and as such can be considered a depiction of new media hauntings. Here I contend that *Cyber's* evocation of Anonymous is to borrow cultural fears about Anonymous but also tame those fears. I argue that *Cyber* is attempting to render Anonymous a threat that can be contained by a security theatre with neoconservative political ideologies.



*Figure 5.3 Side-by-side comparisons of Anonymous' digital aesthetic of haunting and CSI: Cyber's take on a masked hacker (from top left to bottom right: 'Fire Code' 2015; 'Pre-credit sequence', 2015; Anonymous – How to Join Anonymous, 2012; Anonymous – Message to the Citizens of the World V, 2016).*

In the JUSTU5 and Anonymous videos the perspective is frontal view with the masked presenter positioned directly in front of the camera. The IDENTITY UNKNOWN screen in the pre-credit introduction begins at a highly similar frontal view before panning, tilting, and changing pitch according to the franchise's visual aesthetics to suggest the same image but from a slightly different perspective (see *Figures 5.1 and 5.3*). This slightly different perspective in the visual aesthetics of the programme is to indicate more information than meets the eye, be it meta data associated with a digital photograph or here as a technique to reinforce the unknowability of the digital lurkers and criminals, like JUSTU5. Although such a visual technique is in keeping with and forwards the aesthetic of the franchise, it is also one

of the techniques that break the realism of the programme and indicate its characteristic fakery.

In 'Corpses, Spectacle, Illusion: The Body as *Abject* and *Object* in *CSI*', Glynn and Kim argue that the *CSI* franchise specifically marshals its stylish aesthetics and lavish post-production special effects to clearly illustrate its own inauthenticity (2009, p. 96). They observe: 'CSI does not seek to "conceal" its fictional world. Its gory model work, intrusive computer graphics and special effects instead reveal its textual boundaries and the constructed-ness of its representations (103). Glynn and Kim find *CSI*'s depiction of the corpse as sanitized-for-TV body horror (93), a characterisation of the visual aesthetic that suggestively lacks the emotive, ambiguous power of a digital aesthetic of haunting. The *CSI* visual aesthetic is a signature of the franchise and is *not* being used to specifically disrupt the narrative and/or announce the problematic present absence of a ghost, as Marc Olivier argues Glitch Gothic (2015) aesthetics can do. Instead, even as the visual aesthetics of the programme initially set up generic horror cues, and the episode's treatment of an Anonymous-like video, the overarching visual aesthetic of *Cyber* are not being marshalled to cultivate fear but to demonstrate the State-sanctioned security and surveillance theatre as capable of containing a threat on the magnitude of Anonymous.

At this point in the narrative it has already been suggested that Nelson's friend, going by the handle M3TA, may be involved more than he lets on. Indeed, he has embraced the new handle JU5TU5 and the programme guides the viewer to make the association. But, even as viewers first encounter the JU5TU5 video, it seems more indicative of one mastermind (he has hand-picked his victims), acting as

a lone wolf in a routine ‘arson for profit’ motive which, as Ryan explains, is a viable capitalistic endeavour. PE pay the ransom hoping JUSTU5 makes good on his promise that ‘all this goes away’ once he has the money. This fuels Ryan’s fears this only gives him incentive to do it again. Each of these details, a lone hacker, out for profit, communicating directly with a corporation all framed in the evidently fake visual aesthetics of the *CSI* franchise, contrast with the tactics, visuals, techniques, audience and ideology of Anonymous. These changes are part of *Cyber*’s depiction of the cultural fear suggested by Anonymous being contained by the neoconservative policing.

The collective nature of Anonymous represents a different scope and scale, and even specifically complicates the place bound nature of an individual. It is notoriously difficult (by design) to pin down Anonymous’ collective political, social or moral compass. Anonymous is a collective, representing a different (more networked spectral) threat of scale, scope and multiplicity. Similarly, Anonymous’ videos are posted on YouTube and specifically made publically available, even if addressed to a specific person, organization or grievance. The aim of Anonymous’ videos is not profit; rather they are meant to scare and galvanize the public to radical social action through their intentional cultivation of a digital aesthetic of haunting.

Anonymous’ self-styling as the ‘End Boss of the Internet’ can be considered the direct opposite of the neoconservative ideology depicted in *Cyber*. Yet, recast through a neoconservative political ideology, threats of scale in *Cyber* are routinely tracked down to a small group or an individual, the threat of virtuality always is tracked from a virtual IP address to a physical address. For all the global implications JUSTU5 threatens (at one point when meeting with Nelson he says ‘M3TA is

worldwide, son!'), he is one of the most proximate criminals the Cyber team face. JU5TU5's *modus operandi*, the depiction of his relationship to technology and the socio-political messages depicted in *Cyber* are not borne out as similarities to Anonymous. But as a signal that the Cyber team can contain cultural fears on the suggested scale of Anonymous, JU5TU5 is a catchable villain, a known villain in the 'Fire Code' episode thus reinforcing the intended dominant reading of neoconservatism prevailing over free-floating signifiers of fear surrounding new media technologies.

The resolution of the episode is more functional than frightening, a point that furthers my argument about the programme attempting to cultivate a neoconservative political perspective as the dominant reading. The reason the 'Fire Code' exploit is worth 10 million dollars to PE (suggestive of the real company HP, Hewitt Packer) is that they have an effective Microsoft-like monopoly on the electronics market. Nelson initially targeted the company with his 'Ghost Print' code because nearly everyone has one of their products (laptop batteries are also susceptible). To add to the scope and fear of the threat, in the F.B.I. Cyber building there are nine such printers; as Shifter declares: 'In one of the most secure places in the country and even we were vulnerable'. The suggestion is, if one of the most secure places in the country is vulnerable, it is possible that the 'you' that the intro threatens cybercrime 'could happen to' could be the victim of a malicious zero-day vulnerability exploit, save for the fact that technology is being put into service as a mode of prevention rather than cause by the State as neoconservative social and moral policing authority.

Tamed by the dominant reading of neoconservatism, the threat of printers setting the world on fire does not reach the same apocalyptic levels of spectral destruction as in *Pulse* or the direct supernatural influence of *Unfriended*. JUSTU5's capture at the conclusion of the episode reinforces a mood of triumph rather than enduring fear and problematic recursion akin to haunting. Fears wrought by new media technologies, including fears of scale can be solved by agents of the State wielding those technologies for collective good rather than personal ill. That is the suggested neoconservative reading the episode has actively been trying to prioritise by dispelling the supernatural as a possible reading of the portrayal of the contemporary new media technical ecology. But, where Anonymous is arguably using fear in the new media attention economy in an evocative, deliberate way as I argue in chapter four, the *CSI* take on an Anonymous style video and masked antagonist plays as plot service at best and near comedy at worst.

Although the crime is solved by the capable agents of the State, the implausible premise of someone setting the world on fire via printers and computers, undercuts what fear the episode is suggesting the neoconservative police authority can contain. To put things into perspective, *Pulse* is clearly apocalyptic, and the imagery is likewise unbelievable (requiring the suspension of disbelief), but even according to the premise of *Cyber* and its cultivation of a neoconservative political approach to crime and technology, the supposedly nationwide or global threat of burning computer printers or batteries is flimsy despite being depicted as 'more real' than a spectral invasion. Even so, recovered chip sets, imbedded IP address and skilful police work dispel the spectral explanations of the mystery fires, eventually revealing the plot to be part of an elaborate crime focusing on profit, more in the

realm of Radcliffe's explained supernatural or human villain in *Scooby-Doo* who would have gotten away with it if it were not for those meddling kids.

In the end, in 'Fire Code', where the conditions of networked spectrality seems applicable, there is no deliberate lingering sense of fear, ambiguity, or haunting. In fact, there is no supernatural whatsoever. The haunting possibility of the electronic elsewhere is dispelled by the expert Cyber team, expressed instead in the reassuring neoconservative terms the programme endorses as the dominant reading more broadly. I use networked spectrality to challenge this dominant reading in my analysis of 'Evil Twin'.

### **Evil Twin: Spectral Evidence and Networked Spectrality**

'Evil Twin' begins with a cyber security breach at an upscale hotel located two blocks away from the New York City UN building. The Cyber team fear a 'dark hotel' scenario, in which the high-profile guests' information could be at risk. But the crime is eventually revealed to be one of passion. Adele Foster is found dead in her hotel suite and the man responsible, her abusive and controlling boyfriend Shane, is using the hotel's 'digital butler' service to cover his tracks and frame a nightclub owner he thinks is his rival. Shane uses an 'evil twin' router to frame Evan Westcot, 'pushing' all the incriminating evidence onto his digital devices.

This instance of using digital data to frame someone initially tests the Cyber team's commitment to the veracity of their digital evidence. But the Cyber team eventually thwart Shane's digital manipulation of the data by 'Frankensteining' Adele's recovered mobile phone, and apprehend him before he kills Evan and leaps to his own death. In what I argue is a sweeping overreach of State authority, with



implications for Adele's privacy and the ethical responsibilities of the new media technology hard and software manufacturers, the Cyber team use the motion tracking chip in Adele's phone to reconstruct her movements leading up to her death. When synchronized with data from Shane's mobile tracking chip, the team prove he is the murderer.

Where 'Fire Code' evokes the cultural interpretations of haunted media as a context to be specifically dispelled by neoconservative political ideology, 'Evil Twin' does not. But such new media haunting tropes are evident given the treatment of data that remains significant after its creator's death, and the spectral characteristics imparted by the structural affordances of networked publics. To read the new media haunting tropes evident in 'Evil Twin' is to read against the dominant neoconservative framework of the programme, yet there are grounds for such a reading because Adele's *posthumous* data leads to the capture and presumed conviction of her murderer.

The name 'Evil Twin' evokes the gothic trope of the double, a duplicate that appropriates one's true identity, but that has an independent, evil subjectivity. In *Cyber* the term has a technical meaning: a dummy router that can manipulate (by pushing or extracting) data onto connected devices. 'Evil Twin' dramatizes a similar trope as the 'Be Right Back' (2013) episode of *Black Mirror*, the trope of data enduring beyond the lifespan of the data's creator. Where 'Be Right Back' considered the implications of how spectral data can endure as a source of haunting, as I argue in chapter two, on the face of it, 'Evil Twin' furthers *Cyber's* systematic dispelling of the spectral in favour of the ability to read, and convert digital evidence into proof, conviction and justice. Yet, in *Cyber's* substitution of data for the functionality of a

ghost and/or themes of haunting as they might be expressed in a traditional ghost story, 'Evil Twin' depicts a new type of media haunting, suggesting a networked spectrality reading.

There has long been a tension between belief in the supernatural and the expulsion of such beliefs by the rational and the scientific. This tension exists in literature and genre theory, was foundational to Freud's conception of the uncanny (expressed as animism), and structures the ghost story form as part of the realistic, rational, natural setting that becomes disrupted by the supernatural. Further examples are Anne Radcliffe's use of the explained supernatural (Castle, 1995), overlapping themes and formal expectations across early gothic, detective and crime fiction novels and genre expectations that began in literary iterations and have evolved into pillars of the television crime drama genre.

The genre similarities between crime fiction and the ghost story as off-shoots of the nineteenth-century gothic novel, provide an important context in reading the networked spectrality elements in *Cyber*. The tropes of the gothic novel influenced other forms of nineteenth-century fiction including the ghost and detective story, Catherine Spooner (2010, p. 246) articulates. Both crime fictions and ghost story genres generally revolve around the possible solution to a past mystery be that solving a crime or navigating the spectral conditions of the traditional ghost to put it to rest. The emphasis on formal structure is perhaps the most significant relationship between the ghost story and detective fiction as it also grounds other generic similarities: the cultivation of a realistic, natural setting; a structured encounter with the clues, traces, evidence; the predominance of a crime, a murder, a forgery, a

circumvention of justice; and a negotiation by the author of the reader's expectations.

Where the line between the ghostly and the rational is blurred across the literary history of gothic and detective fictions there is also an important historical precedent of 'spectral evidence' being admissible in the court proceedings of the Salem Witch Trials. Spectral evidence was testimony that included dreams or visions as evidence that the accused witch's spirit had appeared to the victim. This type of dream or vision evidence was admitted by chief justice William Stoughton who presided over the Bury St. Edmunds (1662) witch trial, that set a precedent for spectral evidence to be admissible in subsequent witch trials (Gilbert, 1997). Even as spectral evidence was deemed admissible, religious and legal authorities sensed that the ephemeral nature of the evidence complicated the authority the court represented.

Rev. Cotton Mather was a proponent of the use of spectral evidence but on the grounds that convictions should not be based solely upon such ephemeral evidence (Lovelace, 1979). Only after the trials collectively known as the Salem Witch Trials was the use of spectral evidence opposed when it was argued by Rev. Increase Mather that it could be an avenue of demonic deception and thus taint the courts authority as judiciary (1693). The religious and legal authorities were so intertwined and so revered as fonts of power that there was little opposition to the administration of spectral evidence on the grounds that it could be used in false testimony by the witness, or to make false accusations. The historical use of spectral evidence affirms the blurry relationship between the investigative process, the

reading of clues and evidence, and its application in legal proceedings and the dispensation of justice.

The visual aesthetics of *CSI* direct viewers to prioritise a certain depiction of the past, the corpse, and evidence, with neoconservative political implications. I argue that the depiction of a government agency giving no pause to the extraction of the private data of the dead, especially in *Cyber's* depiction of this end justifying a neoconservative means, has concerning implications for the State's position as both regulating body and enforcing judiciary, and on the rights and privacy of industries and customers. These concerns combine with the neoconservative depiction of the finality of justice. With the burden of proof being met justice can be inferred to be served, but the complex network and spectral mechanics depicted in the episode begin to indicate the troubling overreach of the State and its agents. On this point, my networked spectrality reading is informed by a real-world case in which the F.B.I. sought to force mobile phone manufacturer, Apple, to provide a technical means of unlocking the recovered iPhone from the perpetrator of a mass shooting that took place in San Bernardino, California, in December 2015 (Zapotosky, 2016).

The F.B.I. argued that determining to what extent the suspect may have been involved in religious radicalisation was a matter of national security and could represent a valuable source of information that could prevent other acts of violence or terrorism. Apple defended itself, and was joined in this defence by other manufacturers of new media hard and software, on the grounds that the existence of such a tool set a dangerous precedent and risked undercutting the security protections and features the company afforded its customers. Although Apple attempted to spin their opposition to the existence of such a tool on the moral

grounds of the privacy of their customers, their position is not wholly innocent. Part of their motivation was a capitalistic imperative: the need to protect themselves from their copyrighted trade secrets being rendered publicly available. As the new media technology industries geared up for a legal defence, the F.B.I. abruptly announced that it paid an undisclosed amount of money to a third party that provided the technical means of granting access. Media reports indicate that investigators did not find any links to foreign extremist groups.

Usually the plots of the *CSI* franchise are stylised as realistic, but tend toward implausibility in both the depicted visuals and elaborate plots. But in an instance of life imitating a television programme, the plot of 'Evil Twin' bears a resemblance to the events and legal fallout of the San Bernardino December Massacre. 'Evil Twin' aired April 15, 2015 and the events of the San Bernardino Massacre played out in December 2015 and during the early part of 2016, so there is no intended allusion. Scholars Basil Glynn and Jeongmee Kim (2009) have observed the possibility of this unintended type of real events overlapping with the fiction of the show in their article, 'Corpses, Spectacle, Illusion: The Body as *Abject* and *Object* in *CSI*'.

In terms of my networked spectrality reading of *Cyber*, the actions of the real F.B.I. in the San Bernardino case justify the fears of State overreach that I argue are evident throughout season one. Through *Cyber's* depiction of transferring the functionality once reserved for ghosts to hackers and/or the State, in the 'Evil Twin' and 'Family Secrets' episodes, is a monumental and troubling change to the traditional conception of haunting, beyond social anxiety readings and moral panics. It colours contemporary depictions of hackers, the State and its agents, and contemporary new media technologies with fears and associations with the spectral.

**‘Your devices tell us you’re *lying*’: The Infallibility of Evidence**

As part of a long-running and commercially successful franchise, *Cyber* has well-established conventions of form, plot and story arcs, pacing, production values, as well as conventions about how criminology, psychology, and forensic science are depicted, and the role of evidence toward the resolution. ‘Evil Twin’ is indicative of the franchise’s stylistic ‘evidential fetish’ (Turkel, 2009) as a means of accessing truth, and thereby dispelling the supernatural as a context of the resolution of the depicted crime of passion. The corpse, in vivid detail and extreme close-up, opposed to courtroom convictions or depictions of the breakdown of social welfare, is upheld throughout the scholastic criticism about the *CSI* franchises as part of the programmes innovation on the TV crime drama genre. The claim that through the evidence it contains, the corpse can speak about the past in a similar way a traditional ghost gives supernatural voice to the past, is one justification for approaching *Cyber* through a networked spectrality lens.

In a telling scene in the pilot episode, Agent Ryan chastises one of the first responders for unplugging a networked baby camera. Responding to Krumitz’s comment that unplugging it is the easiest way to insure a loss of potentially vital information stored in the device’s on-board physical memory (again a physical device with important immaterial, informational connotations), Ryan looks directly into the camera and says that all technological devices are to be treated like a corpse: ‘please treat all hardware, including the baby cam, like a dead body. Don’t touch it, don’t move it, until we get there’ (‘Kidnapping 2.0’, 2015). While this reinforces the premise that the *Cyber* team can retrieve vital information from the physical devices, it also suggests that in the programme the site of crime scene investigation will be

the technology in a similar way that previous series extract information from the corpse.

The Cyber team collect the motherboards of burnt printers, reconstruct a mobile phone from pieces flushed down the toilet, triangulate perpetrators' virtual IP addresses with their physical addresses and more, all of which in the more than capable hands of the Cyber team, allow for the extraction of significant digital information and evidence. In other words, what I have been developing networked spectrality to illuminate through a consideration of the material factors surrounding new technologies and networked structure throughout this thesis, is offered up as form-fitting police procedural genre expectation and the province of investigative police work. Exploring this focus with consideration to networked spectrality reveals a fascinating and complex aspect of the programme: through an investigation of the corpse-like technology, the Cyber team draws vital *scientific* information from the realm of haunting Sconce describes as the cultural awareness of the electronic elsewhere.

As Silke Panse writes '[w]ith *CSI*, knowledge has a glossy aesthetic, simulation makes up evidence, the invisible assumes visibility, the internal is externalised, and object subjectivity replaces the subject's psychological perspective' (2007, p. 166). I understand her point as part of a larger scholastic precedent for reading clues and the investigative process as a type of spectral communication, a modern evolution of the debate surrounding spectral evidence. 'In that it deals with marks that continue to be productive of meaning after the death of their producers, or at least those who bear them,' writes Charlie Gere, '*Crime Scene Investigation* would seem to literalise Derrida's sense of writing, and mark-making more generally, as uncanny. In *Crime*

*Scene Investigation*, the dead continue to haunt the living, without any need for supernatural agency' (2007, p. 137). For Gere, reading the material traces of the dead in *CSI* indicates a hermeneutical problem: 'whether it is possible to understand what the traces of the dead mean' (p. 133). In this regard, networked spectrality and the police procedural do the similar hermeneutical work of interpreting and providing context for the dead.

Where Gere favours a Derridian approach and suggests that 'the law of genre' (p.129) grants crime fiction its spectral character, I use networked spectrality to contend that it is the structural affordances of new media technologies and their social use. In this thesis, I use networked spectrality to be more materially specific about haunting. *CSI: Cyber* is a cultural product that depicts an end point of such a focus on materiality through its treatment of evidence leading to the conviction of criminals. In such a reassured and reassuring depiction, the programme prioritises a neoconservative political ideology. It is trying to celebrate the material and the rational (deduction, training, science, skill, over the illogical logic of supernatural cause and effect) but spectrality is so ingrained with technology in the cultural imagination (because of the structural affordances) that even *Cyber's* specific effort *not* to be read as the supernatural – nevertheless casts hackers in the role of ghosts. Through my networked spectrality analysis, the State and its agents can also be considered as performing the functionality once reserved for ghosts.

It takes surprisingly little to restructure the narrative of 'Evil Twin' as a ghost story: the abusive and controlling Shane murders Adele in a crime of passion. Haunted by feelings of guilt and seeking revenge on the man he considered his rival, Shane attempts to frame Evan and absolve himself of Adele's death. But in the form of digital



evidence that bears Adele's immutable human essence, she can communicate Shane's guilt to the Cyber team. So thoroughly haunted by his actions and the present absence of Adele, he attempts suicide, but, and this is an important part, his attempt is stopped by Agent Mundo. Shane is arrested, and it is assumed that he is found guilty of murdering Adele. It is crucial that Shane be caught, like JU5TU5, and Ryan's hacker, Logan Reeves, to preserve the neoconservative roll of the State as capable judiciary. But in this instance, Shane's capture has important ramifications on the spectral mechanics evident in the episode, which I will detail in due course.

As the sixth episode of the thirteen-season run, 'Evil Twin' is the approximate middle of the first season. In the previous episodes, the franchise's characteristic focus on evidence has led to the capture the 'new breed' of cyber criminals. 'In the televisual world of *CSI*, in comparison to the work real professional CSIs do,' Willam J. Turkel writes, 'there is only one real past – *what really happened* – and the material evidence found within a tightly contained crime scene is necessary and sufficient for the fictional CSIs to determine what this past was' (2009, p. 139). What is significant is not just that evidence can speak about the past, but that through the knowledge and skill of a CSI, it can be understood as Truth. 'Items of physical evidence – from abrasions and accelerant to Zolpidem and the zygomatic arch – become conflated with abstract concepts like veracity and certainty' (Turkel, 2009, p. 141).

Driving the evidence-as-vehicle-of-truth point home, like so many other theorists that understand *CSI* as portraying a conservative ideological function regarding crime, Turkel writes, '[i]n the world of *CSI*, violence is counterbalanced by the certainty of apprehension and punishment, a certainty based on the ever-multiplying techniques of the forensic sciences' (142). What is an otherwise

conventional police procedural narrative about framing someone for murder in the first half of 'Evil Twin', becomes a point of discussion in my networked spectrality reading because of the episode's stylistic depiction of police work as a ghostly version of the past, and how *digital* spectral evidence is used in the episode.

Panse (2007) observes a shift from emotive responses like considering the psychological motive of the criminal in the television crime drama, to the prioritization of the surface, the ephemeral visual aesthetics and the immaterial investigative process. Such a thematic shift toward the emotive, psychological, surface, ephemeral and immaterial is suggestive of both spectral evidence and ghosts and themes of haunting. Of interest is the long association between ghost stories and psychology by way of Freud and psychoanalysis. Traditional readings of ghost stories, informed by psychoanalytical criticism, place a strong emphasis on the ghost as a signifier of that past, especially the past as a return of the repressed. 'Family Secrets' is wholly occupied with themes of the returning past.

An emphasis on the return of the repressed figures the ghost as a problematic immaterial agent but one that has tangible effects on the present. There is a standing question at the heart of ghost stories about how ghosts are represented, how they manifest, how such present absences are negotiated. Part of my concern as it applies to representations of evidence and the interpretation of evidence in *Cyber* is a question of representation. How the programme represents the intuition and skill of the CSI as they interpret the corpse as signifier of the past is especially significant in a television show with such a characteristic emphasis on its signature aesthetic. In the crime drama format, there is a well-established visual

language for the presentation of evidence, traces and the often immaterial 'intuition' of police work.

As a stylistic signature of the franchise, the discovery of the crime scene and the team's retrieval of evidence frequently flash back or forward in narrative time, or otherwise offer a visual dramatization of the investigator's suppositions offering visual confirmation and providing the cause and effect assurance between the investigator's display of police work and the viewer's expectations of narrative continuity. In 'Evil Twin' like when Mundo surveys the crime scene, imagining how Adele's murder unfolded. To visually confirm his thought process with the viewer, when Mundo looks at the shattered table, the next scene is a depiction of Adele falling through it. But in the episode, to differentiate the footage from the rest of the style of the show, representations of the past feature characters that have been visually ghosted. The scene takes on a haze with post-production digital effects; the figure of Adele is depicted as translucent, faded into the background layer of the image rather than vibrantly in the foreground.

As a visual cue that these events are what *might* have happened in the past (and are in fact wrong as the concluding spectral video reveals), the figures are hazy, translucent, and rendered as ghostly. The stark contrast in these visualizations of the present and the past is the point. As Panse argues, the messages the dead speak in *CSI* have shifted from 'the (direct) word [...] to that of the (processed) image' (p. 153). 'The emphasis on the image as a means of determining the truth, however,' she continues, 'does not mean that the evidence is immediately visible or directly accessible; it has to be read, processed, deciphered or translated. *CSI* makes the invisible visible' (Panse, 2007, p. 154). This is a visual technique to reconcile the

immaterial and non-visual aspects of investigation with the viewer's expectations of narrative continuity. For example, Ryan notices Shane's bruised hand while initially questioning him, but is not yet able to fully comprehend what it means, in part because at this point all the digital evidence indicates Evan. But they also suggest a spectral link between Ryan and her fellow agent's deductive process: their intuition, their observations, the visual depiction of Ryan's psychologist training and the material evidence. Arquette brings a spectral extra-diegetic context from a previous role. Viewers that watched Arquette in the leading role, Allison Dubois, in the program *Medium* (2005-2011) are invited to read the parallels between the portrayal of the immaterial investigative process on display in *Cyber* and the supernatural means of investigation that make up the plot of *Medium*.

The premise of *Medium* is that a suburban mother of three puts her unique psychic gift of being able to receive communication from the dead to service helping solve criminal cases with the District Attorney's Office (like Oda Mae in *Ghost* (1990), see chapter one). The plot of *Medium* is another modern take on the role of spectral evidence as it pertains to the legal process. Through her psychic visions, dreams, and supernatural contact with the dead and her partnership with the District Attorney, *Medium* is a modern dramatization of the admissibility of spectral evidence in legal proceedings, albeit one purged of the troubling implications of false accusations. *Medium* is indicative of the mash-up of the supernatural and detective genres (*Scooby-doo*, 1969-1970; 2010-2013; *Angel*, 1999-2004; *Supernatural*, 2005-ongoing; *Constantine* 2005; 2014-2015; etc.) which is to say, *Medium* has the important difference from the police procedural as specifically working in a supernatural register. While *Medium* lacks the focus on new media technologies as a crucial

structural element of a networked spectrality analysis, it nevertheless relates the investigative process and the spectral, an association that *Cyber* attempts to actively dispel with an emphasis on police procedure.

Who does the work of investigating, be it the paranormal or the evidence kind and how well, leads Hay to observe that, ‘ghost stories are often a matter of the law, as long we understand the law as the profession that helps one to deal with the past, with its burden: the consequences of past actions. A good lawyer is one who can make the past go away and so is indistinguishable from an exorcist’ (2011, p. 3). In Arquette’s ability in both her prominent television roles, to read spectral evidence from corpses and put it into the service of finding the perpetrator of the cause of death, the role of haunting is subsumed into the rhetoric of law and governance. In this framework, a CSI does the work of exorcism and such finality, such dispelling of the spectral into the scientific, the political and the legal, would seem to be the latest effort to champion scientific rationalism over belief in the supernatural. Except that, as my networked spectrality reading demonstrates, *Cyber* is not so much exorcising the spectral as transferring the themes traditionally allocated to ghosts and hauntings to hackers and agents of the State via the structural affordances of the technologies depicted on the programme.

At this point in the ‘Evil Twin’ narrative, all the evidence the Cyber team has gathered seems to indicate Evan’s involvement. When Ryan and Mundo question him, it is with a tone of characteristic assurance: through their able police work and their expert skill in reading material and digital clues, the Cyber team expect this case to be solved in the same fashion these techniques have solved similar cases in past

episodes. The tone of Evan’s questioning is accusatory because the Cyber team already have incriminating digital evidence that places him at the scene of the crime:

RYAN: You hacked the Kirkendale hotel’s main computer. We know this because the IP address of the device used led us back to *your* laptop.

[...]

You murdered Adele and activated those [digital butler] services to make it look like she was alive three days after her death.

When Evan denies any knowledge of these events and claims not to know anyone named Adele, Ryan and Mundo divulge their evidence:

RYAN: Your phone’s locations services put you in that hotel.

The Cyber team have corroborated Evan’s mobile phone’s geo-tracking features with the threatening text messages sent to Adele from his phone. The location services even indicate the altitude of the device, seeming to definitively put him in the room.

Yet, Evan still denies any involvement:

EVAN: I didn’t kill anybody, I didn’t do any of these things.

RYAN: Evan, your devices tell us you’re lying.

As a structural trait of the previous *CSI* franchises and all the episodes of *Cyber* leading up to ‘Evil Twin’, evidence does not lie. This is a crucial part in the established neoliberal and neoconservative readings of the programme’s portrayal of crime and justice. As Byers and Marie Johnson argue,

A key way in which *CSI* has sold good television is by *tidying up the damage* of contemporary neoliberalism and neoconservatism: rendering criminality and crime fighting as rational calculation purged of social messiness, error, and power relations, deploying representation of scientific and technological

wizardry to purify policing, law, and justice, all of course in the time of an episode with commercial breaks (2009, pp. xix-xx).

The premise of 'Evil Twin' subverts these truth and power dynamics established as fundamental principles of the programme thus far.

Most criminals are caught because the CSIs can read the meta data that the criminals could not, or in the case of hackers and expert users like Shane who can read and manipulate the meta data, they get caught because they made a mistake. But the specific association of *posthumous digital* evidence that leads to a suggested conviction opens onto a networked spectrality reading. The corpse-as-evidence takes on a slightly different role and function when considered and compared to the ghost story. It is not just that the dead speak, an otherwise supernatural proposition, it is the immaterial implications of such communication and the light in which the agents that interact with the message are presented.

#### **'I can't live without her': the Spectral Mechanics of 'Evil Twin'**

The Cyber team eventually discover what is causing the data to lie: Shane's cunning use of an evil twin router to digitally frame Evan and cover up his accidental murder of Adele. In keeping with the dominant reading of the programme Shane's 'smart' use of the 'right' software was responsible for changing Evan's text message data base, making it seem like Evan had sent the threatening texts composed by Shane. But even in its commitment to a technical means, instead of the supernatural, Shifter's response is significant:

KRUMITZ: If you're smart enough and have the right software you can manipulate that file and make it look like you are getting text messages from whoever you want, whenever you want. OR to someone else's phone [...]

SHIFTER: That is impressive, and a little creepy.

Despite *Cyber's* efforts at depicting a technical context rather than a supernatural, the 'creepy' nature of mediation is a deep-seated cultural response.

Once the Cyber team realise the digital evidence has been manipulated to frame Evan, they identify Shane as the true culprit. In the meantime, Shane has realised his elaborate digital framing attempt has failed, and decides to deal with Evan the old-fashioned way, with the gun he keeps under his bed. As the action rises toward the climax of the episode, Mundo breaks up the volatile confrontation between Shane and Evan. Seeing no other way out, Shane flees to the rooftop where the tone of the scene suddenly changes: 'I can't live without her', Shane says as he takes a step toward the building's ledge. Mundo grabs Shane after he leaps off the rooftop and pulls him back over the ledge to safety, then places him under arrest. Saving Shane from his suicide attempt has important ramifications on the spectral mechanics in the episode, as I will discuss shortly. With Shane in custody, but no concrete proof he murdered Adele, the priority of the episode becomes a race to satisfy the burden of proof. In the face of all the material and digital evidence coming up short, the episode leaves an in-road for the spectral: *digital* spectral evidence.

The Cyber team rebuild Adele's mobile phone to retrieve any information that might lead to a conviction of Shane. The programme frames this evidence collection in effectively spectral terms: they 'Frankenstein' the fragments of Adele's phone with stock parts to 'resurrect' the data. Between this narrative context and

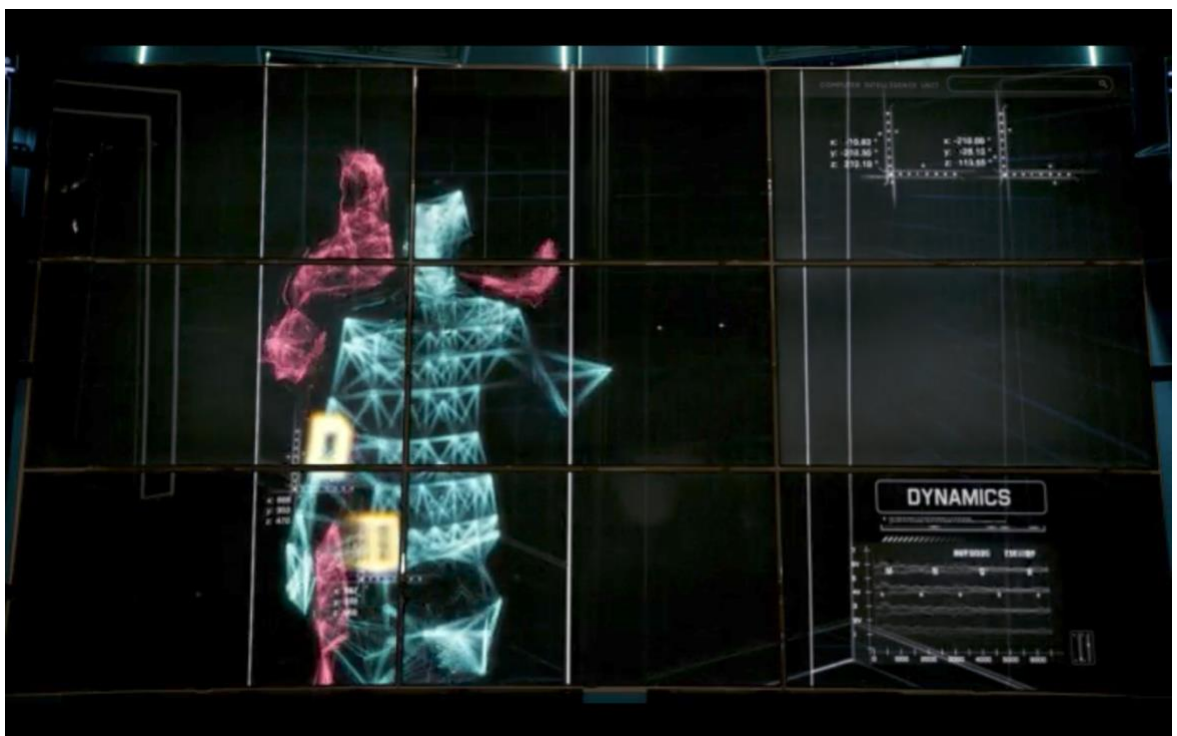


the *posthumous* context of this data collection, I consider it spectral data and use networked spectrality in my analysis of the resolution of the episode. As it turns out, there are complex spectral mechanics at work, despite the programmes attempted disavowal of a supernatural context.

Unlike how the similar problem of retrieving potentially valuable data from the deceased in the San Bernardino December Massacre came to be resolved, the fictional F.B.I. in *Cyber* depicts the agents retrieving the vital information through their knowledge and skill. At one point Krumitz exclaims to Nelson: ‘This is how the good guys do it! Watch and learn...’. The programme gives no consideration to what would otherwise be an extremely important and potentially very emotionally sensitive topic; the extraction of personal data from a living or dead individual. Where the real F.B.I. approached the mobile phone’s manufacturer in the first instance, and appealed to them to unlock the phone as a matter of national security, the *Cyber* team frame their action in the neoconservative ideology of the programme: this is how the good guys stop crime.

As a means of justifying the neoconservative ends of the programme, nowhere is this overreach of State authority coloured as anything other than good. No one bothers to consult with any of Adele’s living next of kin (they are nowhere mentioned in the episode), there is no consideration of the *Cyber* team’s appropriation of Adele’s data as a breach of her privacy, nor is there any sense of the fears the real-world technology companies voiced about the dangerous precedent being set by a government’s willingness to broach the privacy of citizens or risk the exposure of trademarked commercial intellectual property.

In the narrative of the programme, the way the Cyber team ‘proves’ Shane’s guilt is by creating a visual representation of the data gathered by the motion-tracking chip in Adele’s phone and syncing it with data from Shane’s phone. The technical explanation, that in the narrative is suggested as satisfying the burden of proof, is that the synched data from both phones allows the Cyber team to recreate the fight. In keeping with the visual aesthetic of the programme, this explanation is overlaid with a visual rendition of a stylised graph showing the two data sets struggling (see Figure 5.4) and a visually enriched scene of Adele and Shane acting out how the fight took place (see Figure 5.5).



*Figure 5.4 The visual representation of the synchronised data from Adele and Shane mobile phones stylised as an elaborate graph with vaguely human figures ('The Evil Twin', 2015).*



Figure 5.5 The fight between Adele (Kelly Albanese) and Shane (Kristopher Higgins) enriched with digital special effects suggestive of the ‘proof’ offered by the synchronized data sets (‘The Evil Twin’, 2015).

I consider Panse’s observations about the visual depiction of evidence as alluding to the spectral relationship new media technologies foster in the portrayal of evidence and skill in the *CSI* franchise. She writes, ‘[w]ith *CSI*, the aesthetics of science have changed. The status of the evidential as external, attained through indexical observation, has been surpassed by the ‘insider’s view’ of data generated according to the laws of science and computer simulation’ (2007, p. 162).

Considering Panse’s point in accordance with networked spectrality, produce some important observations about what such a graph would look like if generated outside of the visual aesthetic of the programme, and the implausibility that such a graph would lead to a conviction at a trial. As Turkel (2009) has observed the minutia of

realistic police work, like obtaining warrants, and the trial hearings are not the focus of the *CSI* franchise and where depicted tend to be a related but distinct subgenre of televised crime fiction. But the brief attention I pay to these matters are factors of my networked spectrality reading of the scene.

Part of the reason why the visualisation of the fight sequence brings about the resolution of the episode is because it provides the expected narrative continuity afforded by the programme – viewers get to see how the crime happened and how it was solved. To depict the data set as the graph that it would be without the franchise's characteristic embellishment would be a chaotic set of points very far removed from even the vaguely humanoid polygons suggested by the programme. Where the spectral evidence of dreams and visions was deemed admissible to the court during the Salam Witch trials, trends in contemporary criminal justice reflect the realities of an age where still and video images can be easily altered, edited, embellished, etc., by readily available digital software, meaning such photographic or video evidence is increasingly *not* admissible in court trials and as conclusive evidence. Outside of the fiction of the programme, it is unlikely such a data set, even the computer model representation, would lead to a conviction on its own. These may seem like critiques outside of the intended reading of the programme, but the function of the visual representation of Shane's murder of Adele in bringing about the neoconservative resolution of the episode can be challenged by a networked spectrality reading of the spectral mechanics to which the visualisation alludes.

As a visual, the depiction of the struggle between Adele and Shane does not feature any of the digital aesthetics that Olivier (2015) attributes to a glitch gothic aesthetic nor any of the characteristics I attribute to a digital aesthetic of haunting.

Yet, it is spectral. In a similar way that Olivier's focus on the digital materiality of visual representation techniques leads him to observe glitches signalling the spectral (Olivier, 2015), I read the visualisation of the 'proof' of Shane's guilt as an announcement of the spectral.

The context of digital spectral evidence complicates the spectral mechanics that can be read in 'Evil Twin', suggesting an iteration of new media hauntings. According to traditional spectral mechanics, in my reading of the narrative of 'Evil Twin' as a ghost story, Shane's personal guilt manifests as a type of 'psychological haunting' as Briggs identifies it (1977, pp. 142-164). Citing Edgar Allan Poe as a prolific author of ghost stories that treaded the line between mental instability and genuine occurrence of the supernatural, Briggs identifies one iteration of psychological haunting as 'the story in which an incomprehensible urge presses the narrator towards self-destruction or self-revelation' (1977, p. 145). If Shane's plan to frame Evan, his perceived romantic rival, was successful it is possible that Shane's murder of Adele would manifest as haunting through Shane's own feelings of guilt. In his own words, he 'can't live without her'. If Adele's loss haunts Shane in this way, his suicide would represent a resolution to his haunting, although would not necessarily satisfy the illogical logic of the ghost story that sees the spectral vengeance carried out in a similar manor as that which befell the ghost.

Where a resolution in which Shane is successful in his suicide could be argued as the resolution of his guilt in murdering Adele, such a conclusion would deny the characteristic neoconservative assurance that the State and its agents are capable of catching criminals like Shane. Additionally, Shane's successful suicide would leave Adele's digital spectral evidence, and the work of the CSIs in obtaining it, with no one

to convict. This too has implications on the possible themes of haunting available to draw from the episode. With no one to convict does Adele's haunting become suggestively enduring, as an Anglicised iteration of the vengeful woman trope so prevalent in J horror?<sup>11</sup> At one point in the episode Ryan extends Adele's plight to other victims of domestic violence. Reading Adele's spectral evidence as a metaphor for righting all the wrongs of domestic violence is stretching both the neoconservative ideology of the dominant reading and the new media haunting trope of enduring haunting.

Still, the spectral mechanics depicted in 'Evil Twin' remain complex. Shane's capture allows for the dominant neoconservative resolution; represents a traditional, even cathartic form of Adele's spectral revenge; *and* suggests a haunting iteration to Shane's guilt: the memory of Adele and the role he played in her murder will haunt him for the rest of his life. In this type of haunting, which depends on Adele's digital spectral evidence, the State as judiciary ensures Shane is thus haunted. Where this would appear to demonstrate the alignment of neoconservatism and depictions of new media haunting, my networked spectrality reading recognises that such a depiction overlooks the gross overreach of the State, a factor that colours the reach of the State as spectral. This is not the only example on the programme in which a hacker or the State and its agents are directly cast in a role once afforded to ghosts

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<sup>11</sup> The vengeful woman trope is a recurring theme in J-Horror and because there is some cross-over between new media hauntings with *Ringu* (1998)/*The Ring* (2002) being among the most emblematic. Approaching these themes with networked spectrality would address some of the Anglocentric focus on this thesis. I am hopeful this work is taken up by future research and researchers. See Wetmore's 'Technoghosts and Culture Shocks: Sociocultural Shifts in American Remakes of J-horror', 2008; and Linnie Blake's, 'Nihonjinron, Women, Horror: Post-War National Identity and the Spirit of Subaltern Vengeance in *Ringu* and *The Ring*' in *The Wounds of a Nation*, 2008.

or themes of haunting, nor is it the only depiction of State overreach with suggestively spectral implications.

Another example of *Cyber's* depiction of a hacker performing the functionality of a ghost is depicted as the return of Ryan's repressed trauma as a central point of drawing season one to a close in the series finale, 'Family Secrets'. Although the legacy device plot is set up to be part of the rational explanation of how the Cyber team track down Ryan when she goes dark in the episode, and depict the team's capabilities and eagerness to solve even this most difficult and personal crime, even it cannot extricate itself from the past and the spectral. I consider the trajectory, from legacy device to Ryan's most recent laptop, an important factor in my networked spectrality analysis because it is a graphical representation of networked and spectral mechanics aligning to depict a new type of media haunting. Through Raven and Nelson's collective skill, they work backwards from a laptop infected with the same RAT as Nelson discovered on Ryan's laptop (see *Figure 5.6*). When the IP address is corroborated with a physical address, rather than lead the Cyber team straight to the culprit, as per previous episodes, the IP address leads to another secret part of Ryan's past, her ex-husband, Andrew.



*Figure 5.6 Agent Ryan’s hacker, Logan Reeves imbedded a Remote Access Trojan (RAT) in an emotionally significant video file that infected each new device when transferred, forging a link between networked and spectral mechanics and suggesting that, CSI: Cyber contains new media haunting themes (‘Family Secrets’ 2015).*

To help locate and eventually rescue Ryan, the Cyber team must exhume the device that was the first instance of the RAT, the first instance of the crime, from Ryan’s past. In such a way, the legacy device plot depicts the merger of networked and spectral mechanics: networked spectrality. Here, the technical is standing in for the spectral. Ryan can only be freed from the sort of technical haunting of the RAT by extricating it from her past, like how Briggs’ (1977, p. 16) ‘illogical logic’ of haunting



functions in a traditional ghost story. While this might seem like an instance of traditional haunting and not a new media haunting, the context of the Cyber team as agents of the State and the predominance of the technical theatre of surveillance and security in the resolution colour the depiction of haunting.

The state is instrumental in resolving Ryan's narrative of personal trauma which can be read as a type of haunting that structures the entire premise of the programme. In the *History of the Modern British Ghost Story*, Simon Hay (2011) considers personal and political trauma an important historical context of the ghost story, which also has shaped and continues to shape the genre. He writes:

Trauma, as many theorists have observed, leads to failed narrative, gaps in consciousness, slippages in epistemology (for example, Caruth 1996). A traumatic history has trouble saying what *causes* those gaps, failures and slips, though they can perhaps be reconstructed retrospectively [...] Ghost stories are a mode of narrating what has been unnarratable, of speaking such history belatedly, of making narratively accessible historical events that remain in some fundamental sense inaccessible. The figure of the ghost as a present-absence, there and not there both at once, visible and yet invisible, makes the ghost story singularly well-suited to such a task. (p. 4)

Ryan's family secret, the trauma of losing her child, and the specific trauma of the death of a child, remains unnarrated even in the moment of its depicted catharsis. Considering Ryan's personal *spectral* trauma in the background of the entirety of season one, I use networked spectrality to read Ryan's avenging her personal trauma, the migration of the RAT from legacy device to her most recent computer,

and how *Cyber* depicts hackers, the State and its agents as preforming the functionality traditionally ascribed to the ghost and themes of haunting.

In the roll of hacker, Logan stands in for the ghost in Ryan's machine – he is an absent presence, 'conspicuous by his absence' as Ryan deduces in their game of cat and mouse in 'Family Secrets'. Logan is to Ryan as Laura Barns is to Blaire in *Unfriended* but framed in a technical framework rather than one that is specifically supernatural. The lines between the unseen presence of a hacker and their mastery of the technical electronic elsewhere represents a new dynamic to depictions of media hauntings – hackers are performing the work once ascribed to ghosts and blurring the depiction of both in contemporary cultural products that feature the hypervisibility of new media technologies as a context.

The portion of 'Evil Twin' that concerns Shane and Adele's plot concludes when Ryan and Mundo eventually present the evidence of the motion-tracking video to Shane, in a visual redressing of their incorrect allegations towards Evan. While the scene strongly implies Shane confesses after watching the graphical representation of the synched data sets submitted as evidence, no definitive confession is depicted as the scene cuts before he vocally responds to the allegations. The narrative ultimately comes to rest solely on Adele's digital spectral evidence leading to an implied conviction. Networked spectrality demonstrates that this resolution is brought about not by neoconservative ideology about effective policing but by the spectral.

### **Networked Spectrality as Challenge to Neoconservatism**

In 'Evil Twin' to satisfy the burden of proof, the Cyber team put their collective intellect and the resources of the United States Federal Government to use in deciphering the available digital evidence. Through the depiction of data that my networked spectrality reading considers 'spectral' rather than in terms of the police procedural, I read 'Evil Twin' as putting forward a justification of the use of the technological resources of the State for what would otherwise be an unsettling breach of privacy. With concerning ease *Cyber* depicts a government agency *posthumously* using geo-tracking data extracted from consumer digital devices. The fact that this State-sanctioned breach of privacy takes place after the victim's death is crucial to my networked spectrality reading. *Cyber's* co-mingling of the corpse and new media technologies as equally viable sites of evidence opens on to my consideration of the programme as a depiction of new media haunting.

One function of networked spectrality is to rigorously, critically analyse the portrayal of the overlap of the theme of haunting and technology to probe for a deeper, richer understanding of the cultural work haunting can do in a given cultural product. Such a probing task has some significant similarities to procedural police investigation that strives to apply scientific logic, forensic science, psychology and intuition to the solution of a crime. To a large degree, contemporary depictions of new media hauntings maintain a sense of ambiguity as a trope and the haunting tends to endure. The police procedural is largely more interested in arriving at a solution: serving justice, solving the case, providing assurance of effective security. The hermeneutical mechanics between networked spectrality readings and the genre expectations of the police procedural bear some similarity, but the goals differ.

This point becomes more complex considering the spectral nature of the police in concept and function as interpreted by Derrida.

In his essay 'Force of Law', Derrida understands the police wielding a spectral power: '[b]y definition the police are present or represented everywhere there is force of law' (2002, p. 278). According to what Derrida calls the 'visor effect', a reference to King Hamlet's Ghost, a police represents a 'figure without face or figure, a violence that is formless' (Derrida, 2002, 279). The language is evocative of the ghost and the sort of collective associations Anonymous intentionally cultivates.

Derrida continues:

As such, the police is nowhere graspable... in so-called civilized states the specter of its ghostly apparition is all pervasive... And still, as this formless ungraspable figure of the police, even as it metonymizes itself – spectralizes itself – as the police everywhere become, in society, the very element of haunting, the milieu of spectrality. (2002, p. 279)

Understanding police power as a formless, all-pervasive, wholly ungraspable spectre is suggestive not only of ghosts but also of the deliberate counter-stance adopted by Anonymous as explored in more detail in chapter four. How is it that these characteristics are expressed and visualized in the real political and creative instances of Anonymous and Slender Man as elements of networked spectrality, but conceptualised as the ubiquity of fear, danger and risk wrought by the neoliberal/neoconservative contemporary media ecology of late capitalism? The ubiquity of risk and the belief that the mitigation of that risk is one of the few collective enterprises of the state left in such a political ideology suggests a social anxiety reading of *Cyber*.

Throughout the entirety of this thesis I have taken issue with social anxiety readings of texts that attempt to easily pin down representations of ghosts and technology as expressions of social fears. Networked spectrality accesses more nuanced understandings of the complicated relationship between ghosts and technologies and in so doing, challenges the easy application of social anxiety readings. In the introduction, I state my aim in the development of networked spectrality to try and engage more specifically with criticism than simply finding the portrayal of fear surrounding technological advance in contemporary cultural products as just another iteration of the ‘fear of the unknown’ trope. I am developing networked spectrality to provide a critical means to access something more profound than merely reducing fears of technological advance to cautionary tales. In this way, *Cyber* is both confirmation of a conservative and cautionary response to technological advance, and a curious counter in that, through its neoconservative approach, *Cyber* is one of the few conservative, technophilic examples considered in the entire thesis. *Ghost* and *Anonymous* are other technophilic examples, and the creative impulses that surround Slender Man could also be considered as such, but these examples demonstrate romantic, radical, and creative approaches when read through networked spectrality. *Cyber* is rife with potential (albeit often far-fetched) fears relating to new media technologies but it actively works to allay those fears in the conservative tradition of the police procedural rather than the ambiguous tone of enduring threat suggestive of other examples of networked spectrality. No other text considered in this thesis so explicitly endorses technology to *tidy up the damage* (Byers and Marie Johnson, 2009, pp. xix-xx) of the ravages of neoliberalism and

neoconservatism and in so doing, serve the continuation and expansion of a media ecology of surveillance and security.

In their edited collection, *Digital Horror: Haunted Technologies, Networked Panic and the Found Footage Phenomenon*, Linnie Blake and Xavier Aldana Reyes (2016) understand recent horror films as expressing anxieties about and because of the neoliberal digital age. 'The term "digital horror" thus defines any type of horror that actively purports to explore the dark side of contemporary life in a digital age governed by informational flows, rhizomatic public networks, virtual simulation and visual hyper-stimulation' (Blake and Aldana Reyes, 2016, p. 3). The fact that Blake and Aldana Reyes find '[b]oth the style and substance of neoliberal models of economic and social organizations [repeatedly] reflected in the form and content of digital horror narratives' (5), is a reason to approach *Cyber* through the lens of networked spectrality. But unlike the conscious depictions of digital technologies as site and source of contemporary horror, the dominant reading of *Cyber* is actively trying to dispel fears wrought by new media technologies. A networked spectrality approach, however, begins to indicate the elements of digital horror in *Cyber*, subtly colouring the dominant reading from a straightforward neoconservative police procedural television drama, to a glimpse of the frightening reaches of a State sanctioned security and surveillance theatre.

*Cyber's* depiction of new media fear is suggestive of what danah boyd (2012) identifies as 'a culture of fear' surrounding contemporary new media attention economies. Its depicted hypervisibility of the technologies that boyd argues are 'amping up' fear in the contemporary new media attention economies, seems like an innovative premise for a politically neoconservative TV crime drama. Yet *Cyber* ran

only two seasons, the shortest running iteration of the franchise. *Cyber's* treatment of the new media attention economy as a site and source of contemporary fears would seem to be a safe bet for the veteran production team of the *CSI* franchise. *Cyber* was launched as a primetime answer to the emerging online and streaming platforms that depend on the same new media technologies being depicted. To this end, despite being promoted as 'Television's most successful crime franchise' (*CSI: Cyber Season 2 Promo*, 2106), on the back of its previously long running iterations, *Cyber* is a flop while *Black Mirror* (2011 - ) has been renewed for a fourth and possibly more seasons on Netflix, and Showtime's multi-award winning *Mr. Robot* (2015 - ), which loosely dramatizes the more revolutionary aims of Anonymous with shades of novel and film versions of *Fight Club* and *American Psycho*, is currently airing its third successful season. There are numerous factors that separate these programmes from *Cyber* including budgets and cable/online distribution channels, but I find it significant that the technophilic, neoconservative overtones of *Cyber* proved to be the least successful in the franchise. The fact that *Black Mirror* maintains the ambiguity that *Cyber* routinely attempts to dispel in its prioritisation of a tidy neoconservative affirmation, is significant. Understood through networked spectrality, the fear wrought through new media attention economies is incorporated in Anonymous and Slender Man as productive and generative.

There are a number of possible explanations for *Cyber's* relative lack of commercial success, but at the risk of affording too great a power to a television programme, it is possible to speculate that the ideological stance of the programme was too obviously threatening to the way people use their media technologies. Or people are just so familiar with new media technologies that the latest innovation to

the *CSI* franchise came off as already stale, or a collection of easily seen through ludicrous premises. Of equal consideration is the fact that the increasingly spectral characteristic of new media technologies in the cultural imagination consolidates the authority of the State. Power is consolidated along two axes – the spectral characteristics deter, obstruct, and make less evident their use by the State and other political agents, and in the State’s position as regulating body of such new media technologies. These concerns are being taken up as scholars such as Tim Wu (2010), Evgeny Morozov (2013) and Andrew Keen (2015) are casting a more critical eye on contemporary digital media ecology but networked spectrality offers an important reminder of the role of the spectral in mounting the critique.

The construction of the State and its agents as a formless, spectral font of authority plays into neoconservative political ideology by attributing similar fears towards the spectral to the State. But this is an incredibly dangerous power to afford to the State and it is as crucial as ever to scrutinize and contextualize the actions and reach of the State – especially because of the States use of new media technologies to bolster and expand its surveillance and security theatre and because of the State’s role as regulating body of those technologies.

Where ghosts communicate ‘a vindictive past’ (Cox and Gilbert, 1991, p. ix) through spectral, supernatural means, *CSI* franchise crime scene investigators read the corpse as a signifier of past crime through the rational context of skill and science. ‘The skills of the CSIs – as played out in relation to their explorations of the corpse – are very specifically in service to the police and the judicial system, and thus the body in *CSI* recedes from view once it has yielded its secrets (Glynn and Kim, 2009, p. 105). This is a crucial point: the corpse as evidence directs the crime scene



investigation process through personal and professional skill and forensic science.

The ability of the CSI to read the correct clues from the evidence is directly related to solving the crime, whereas the corpse in the ghost story is indicative of the supernatural. In *CSI*, forensic science directly dispels spectral associations, the illogical logic, the disembodied gut that a ghost channels to communicate the past. Where the corpse is a site of evidence, it quickly recedes from view once read, whereas ghosts as signifiers of the past linger throughout the ghost story narrative and perhaps even beyond it.

The illogical logic of the traditional ghost can be conflated with abstract concepts sometimes expressed as a spiritual truth; what Julia Briggs calls the ‘spiritual law of action and reaction’ (2000, p. 123). I use networked spectrality to challenge such a straightforward depiction of the ghost in previous chapters, but here a networked spectrality reading problematises the neoconservative ideological implications of reading the corpse as evidence and truth in *Cyber*. Ghosts have been used to express both radical and conservative stances on technological advance, frequently being represented as either democratic and revolutionary or authoritarian and apocalyptic. The solution-oriented, neoconservative resolutions in *Cyber* should leave no inroads for ambiguity or enduring haunting but in its portrayal of new media as a site of fear and a narrative arc that hinges on significant but concealed aspects of the past, a networked spectrality approach chips away at both the neoconservative ideologies on display, and the comfort of a tidy resolution. A networked spectrality reading reveals some of the more socially and politically unsettling technological reaches of the state in the name of neoconservatism, and an expanding digital security and surveillance theatre. In short, a networked

spectrally approach to *Cyber* undercuts the neoconservative dominant reading of the programme by suggesting the very same security and surveillance media ecology can also be considered a site of fear, a danger to open access, a breach of privacy, and more unsettling realities of technology in the hands of a police state.

### **Unable to Shutdown: Programs Still Running**

In his seminal work, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (2000), Jeffrey Sconce begins with a critical question: over the course of more than 150 years of technological advance, why are the latest technologies considered in the cultural imagination a source and site of haunting? This question formed the foundation of this thesis. Sconce wrote *Haunted Media* amidst a major paradigm shift occurring in media trends and scholarship about ghosts, haunting and spectrality. The critical dominance of psychoanalytical interpretations of ghosts and haunting, that I call 'traditional spectral mechanics', gave way to the new vogue of postmodern scholarship. The rise of postmodern scholarship also coincided with a proliferation and the rapid development of new media technologies.

When Sconce first considered the historic cultural construction of media technologies as haunted, he accurately predicted television would rise to challenge the popular and scholastic dominance of film, in the tradition of new media displacing previously culturally dominant forms. Contemporary media ecologies are 'transmedia' amalgamations of digital video, audio, applications and data transfer services increasingly available on mobile devices that utilise and feed expansive data clouds. Despite Sconce's comparative disinterest in new media hauntings after the publication of *Haunted Media*, I think questioning how the new dynamics of the evolving media ecology affect the historic themes of haunting and spectrality offers insights about the emerging cultural habits of the over 3.8 billion users and the widening social and political effects of technology on modern social life (Miniwatts Marketing Group, 2017).

## New Media Hauntings: Conclusion

Each of the chapters of this thesis takes up a strand of my larger argument: that contemporary new media technologies have changed and continue to change traditional conceptions of haunting especially around the themes of multiplicity, participation, scale, and the tendency to endure. To support this argument I have developed a methodology I call 'networked spectrality' after finding the leading scholarship theorising the relationship between technology and spectrality lacking. Especially formative in my efforts to situate new media hauntings in a more nuanced and more specific context than devotees to postmodernism and to Derrida's conception of hauntology, has been Roger Luckhurst's criticism of the scholastic 'spectral turn' (2002). Networked spectrality is my response to Luckhurst's call for scholars to return specific focus to the ghost and to pay attention to its relevant contexts.

The chapters of this thesis take the material, technical, social, and political as subjects. Thus, my focus on *Pulse* (2006) in chapter one considers the material and technical infrastructure of the Internet. *Pulse* establishes a basis for the digital aesthetics of hauntings, the scope and scale introduced by the cloud and increasingly widespread cultural association between data and spectrality and the themes of multiplicity and enduring haunting taken up in the other chapters. Chapter two considers the untethering of the spectral from the site specific as the ghost is depicted in *Unfriended* as a spectral presence operating in the contemporary data cloud. As a digitally omnipresent and omnipotent ghost that haunts according to the affordances of new media attention economies and networked publics, the ghost of Laura Barns in *Unfriended* exemplifies the increasing cultural association between data and spectrality. As a seemingly all-knowing, all-consuming entity, I argue that

## New Media Hauntings: Conclusion

Big Data is depicted as every bit as spectral in character as Laura Barns, and perhaps as capable and dangerous. Chapter two contains my most sustained use of boyd's affordances of networked publics, the persistent, replicable, scalable and searchable qualities of the Internet and social use of new media technologies that is formative to my networked spectrality method (2010a).

In chapter three I consider the effects of new media technologies on grief and explore how digital avatars can become associated with the immutable human essence of their controllers, but how important social contexts can collapse when the avatar outlives its creator. Therefore, chapter three is about grief as a social context of haunting prone to collapse around mediated remains of a lost loved one. The effects of such a collapse risk plunging the mourner into multiple, enduring continuums of grief akin to haunting. Chapter four explores another social context of new media hauntings; an active and intentional participation with themes of haunting and spectrality.

The communities that created Slender Man and those who consume the propaganda-like promotional materials of the activist and hacker collective, Anonymous, represent the use of digital aesthetics of haunting for social and political ends. Such communities use the tropes and aesthetics of new media hauntings outside of the television and film production industries and offer generative, radical and technophilic conceptions of spectrality rather than the conservative, technophobic position expressed by *Pulse*. Chapter five considers how the neoconservative political ideology depicted in *CSI: Cyber* attempts to contain the expansive, multiple, and participatory tropes of new media hauntings. A key point of

chapter five is how the cultural association between data and spectrality becomes problematically conflated with hackers and the State and its agents.

The chief insight a networked spectrality approach to my chosen texts provides is the identification of the prevailing sense of the spectral character of data in the cultural imagination. This association is bound up in and is a result of the cultural shift toward digital technologies in the twenty-first century. Ghosts can now be multiple, participatory and enduring. One result of this shift is that tropes of haunting have become detached from literal depictions of ghosts to describe the mysterious workings of technology itself: Big Data, the Cloud, hackers. Terry Castle uses the term 'spectralisation' when ghostly characteristics are transferred to living beings (1995). The transference of spectral characteristics to technological systems is, then, networked spectralisation. The hyper-present depictions of new technologies in contemporary cultural products, aided and abetted by the embrace of the 'postmodern occult' by contemporary critics initiates and affirms networked spectralisation (Sconce, 2000, p. 182). The transfer of spectral themes to the digital media ecology and contemporary social practices has material effects in that it encourages the alienation of individuals from the material conditions of the technology they use. In this thesis I use networked spectrality to restore the social, economic and political contexts to spectralised representations of new technologies and in so doing I aim to reconnect users with the material conditions of technology use.

Networked spectrality encourages scholars to be more materially specific about the theme of spectrality in the many forms it manifests in contemporary social life. This aim is complicated, however, by one of the most steadfast characteristics of

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the ghost: a propensity to indicate seemingly oppositional binaries – such as the material and immaterial, the physical and spiritual, presence and absence, living and dead, remembrance and haunting – through their characteristic confounding of the binary. Essential to the ghost story and themes of haunting is that the ghost is complexly neither wholly material or informational, to use Isabella van Elferen's phrase, but simultaneously both (2009). The concept of spectrality is bound up in the quality of the ghost to blur boundaries; it is a representation of presence *and* absence. Ghosts collapse distinct contexts *as a formal quality*. In their association with new media technologies, contemporary ghosts reveal and obscure the characteristics of the material and informational in their both-ness.

This dynamic of the ghost complicates my pursuit of a return of focus to the material conditions that surround continuing cultural associations between data and spectrality. The result of a truly relentless pursuit of material specificity should dispel the spectral. Marwick and Ellison's (2012) digital ethnography could be considered an 'official' account of how digital technologies are affecting the contemporary visibility and experience of death, grief, mourning and remembrance in networked publics. They find the affordances of networked publics affects mourners ability to engage in the impression management of the deceased. Many modern religions propagate hopes of an afterlife of reunion, but as I observe in chapter three, such sentimental remembrance can become complicated by the persistence of mediated remains. Mediated remains can confound the grieving process in multiple ways; they can seem too static, but also specific contexts can collapse through the evolution of the technologies and social use. The use of new media technologies by the State for law enforcement and as regulating body would also appear to dispel the spectral

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through a commitment to material evidence and scientific and political consensus. I use networked spectrality to trouble these factors in chapter five.

In the introduction to this thesis, I raised some structural questions about the contemporary depiction of new media hauntings. Does a new media technological context indicate a new dynamic for the theme of haunting (or is it the latest iteration of a familiar set of historic, literary, and filmic ghost story and horror convention tropes?) What does a more materially, socially and politically informed context than the simple equation of technology with gothic fears of the unknown illuminate about ghosts, themes of haunting, and spectrality? What can be gained when we change the perspective from new media technologies as harbingers of social anxieties, to a consideration of the role new media hauntings play in the contemporary attention economy?

One of my aims for networked spectrality is to provide a more context-specific alternative to analyse cultural products than rehearsing technophobic or technophilic responses to new technologies. If a social anxiety reading is de-emphasized, and the more historically, socially, and politically specific context is prioritised, fear can be located and understood as an especially effective way of participating in the new media attention economy. Ultimately, this signals the most significant change new media technologies have had on the theme of haunting: the function of new media haunting is to perpetuate the spectre of ambiguity and fear in the new media attention economy *as an aesthetic, as entertainment, as removed from the dangers that might actually surround new media technologies* such as misuse of data and overreach by the State or the more chaotic actions of hackers;



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the obliteration of the division of the private and public; an expanding database of *your* information but without the context of *you*.

The fears new media hauntings represent are misaligned. New media hauntings draw their power from the widespread lack of awareness of how new media technologies work, and the ways in which the surrounding material factors have been obscured *as an affordance of those technologies*. The situations that people take notice of are far less contrived than the intricate plots of new media haunting narratives. Digital technologies are now the ubiquitous, banal and taken for granted routine of lived social experience. Users tend to take notice of the material and economic factors that the spectral character of data characteristically obscures only when their private, personal, or financial information is at risk, like when the database of the largest credit monitoring company, Equifax, was compromised (Morley, 2017).

At most other times, it is second nature for users to trade their privacy, personal information, browsing and shopping habits, content, etc., for access. This is part of the reason that unchecked technological determinism, the belief that new technologies will solve future problems, can be a dangerous and misguided attitude about technological advance. Largely these factors do not cause social anxiety. A social anxiety reading might focus on the theme of cyberbullying in a horror narrative but is less likely to represent the horror of the wholesale surveillance the same new media technologies enable.

I consider the identification of the spectral character of data among the most important outcomes of my application of networked spectrality because it enables proficient users, hackers, and agents of the State to blur the roles traditionally

afforded to ghosts and themes of haunting and spectrality. Although I detail the complex interplay between hackers and the State in my analysis of Anonymous in chapter four and *CSI: Cyber* in chapter five, the depiction of the hacker as new media spectre appears to be gaining popularity as indicated by success of the techno-thriller television series *Mr. Robot* (2015 - ), warranting further application of networked spectrality. The spectral character of data favours the Big Data harvesters, the State as policing and regulatory body, the Internet and mobile phone service providers and hackers. Although hackers tend to be negatively portrayed in the broadcast media, many activists including Anonymous and members of online communities fight for the protection of free speech, grassroots organisation and creativity through an awareness and appropriation of the power dynamics afforded by the spectral character of data.

A theme to which I have not been able to do justice in this thesis is that of 'near or not quite' ghost stories. As the hacker has undergone a process of networked spectralisation, so has the cyberbully. Cyberbullying remains among the most dominant social fears about the new media attention economy even as emerging research reveals that young people do not always share the concerns of their parents and may be better suited to handle themselves online than research that focuses on social anxieties presumes (boyd, 2014). A series of twenty-first-century texts blur the spectral characteristics of the hacker and cyberbully. This connection is established in *Unfriended*, as I discussed in chapter 2, but also features in a less overtly spectral fashion in based-on-a-true-story, made-for-British-television film, *Cyberbully* (2015), and Netflix's provocative but highly popular *13 Reasons Why* (2017 - ). A networked spectrality analysis of 'near or not quite' ghost stories would

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allow further comments on the networked spectralisation of depictions of cyberbullying. It would also be another example that helps move networked spectrality more thematically closer to addressing lived social reality, in a similar way as my analysis of Anonymous and Slender Man reflects upon the on and offline and real and fictitious divide.

Throughout this thesis I have used networked spectrality to theorise predominantly Anglocentric and so-called 'Western' and 'first world' depictions of new media haunting. But digital media technologies are increasingly global. More work around global interpretations of spectrality and data networks is needed. In this regard, I would like to see the networked spectrality methodology enhanced by local conceptions of haunting but also by accounts of the local points of material infrastructure – what does more awareness of the geographically dispersed server farms do to the spectral character of data? I invite future researchers to take up and refine networked spectrality to contextualise the global characterisation of the material realities and cultural conceptions of data in the early twenty-first century. Through further refinement and use, I hope the combined awareness of the material, social and political factors of networked spectrality can also enrich media scholarship, sociology, ethnography and political policy.

The use of new media technologies has now completely altered, and continues to alter a range of cultural products. Networked spectrality offers a means through which to consider the role themes of haunting are playing in contemporary society and politics. From the spectral architecture of the Internet, to the way social media has changed social behaviour, to the way new media technologies are used to shape politics and policing, networked spectrality offers insights into the cultural

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work the theme of haunting is evoked to do. Through networked spectrality, the scope of haunting can be understood as expanding and enduring. Haunting is increasingly participatory, and in some cases, normalized as social behaviour. There remains the oscillating response to new technologies as possible utopias or dangerous social pitfalls but through networked spectrality, such dichotomies can be avoided, and the social and political contexts of new media hauntings specified and exposed. In Anonymous' self-styling as the End Boss of the Internet, they recognise information is Power. Networked spectrality provides a tool with which to expose some of the power relationships bound up with new media technologies and enable the flow of information. It reveals that in the twenty-first century, ghosts are no longer what they used to be, but that they continue to haunt us in multiple, participatory and enduring forms.

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