

## Tape Spectra

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### I.

The film *Contact* (1997) begins with a striking effects sequence. After the title, the film begins with a shot of the Earth from low orbit, in shadow. On the soundtrack, contemporary rock music plays. Both visual and aural signs mark this to be ‘now’, our present day. The camera (virtually) begins to recede, and as it does, the sound stage alters. A phrase ‘obviously a major malfunction’ is heard, taken from the reporting of the Challenger space shuttle disaster of 1986, and the music segues through 1980s pop into disco. A phrase from the theme music of the long-running tv series *Dallas* (1978-1991) is heard, as the Earth and then Moon shrink, in silhouette, displaced by the brightness of the Sun. As the camera recedes from Earth and travels outwards in the Solar System, other phrases from 20th century America are heard: Richard Nixon saying ‘I’m not a crook’; Neil Armstrong’s ‘one small step for man’; Martin Luther King’s ‘free at last’. As the camera swings past Jupiter, we hear of John F. Kennedy’s assassination, then Dean Martin singing ‘Volare’, and a member of HUAC demanding ‘have you ever been a member of the Communist party?’; at Saturn, the Lone Ranger calling ‘Hi-ho Silver’, and an FDR ‘fireside chat’. All the while, the volume decreases, descending towards silence as the intensity of broadcasts decrease, as the camera ‘travels’ further out, leaving the Solar System then the Milky Way itself behind, then moving ever faster away from tiny spiral galaxies disappearing into the distance. The screen is then overcome with whiteness, the edge of the universe; the screen then fades up from white, still ‘zooming out’, as the camera shows the reflection of a window in a young girl’s pupil, who we see finally at a desk, transmitting on short-wave radio: ‘This is CQ, W-9 GFO’. She picks up a contact, receiving in Pensacola, Fla., some thousand miles distant, ‘the furthest one yet’, as her father watches benignly. She marks this on a map of the USA.

In this sequence, political history (of the USA) is mixed up with musical markers from popular culture and music, recognisable emblems of particular eras. Space is signified by time: the further out from the Sun we travel, the further back in time we seem to go. Earth is itself a ‘planet of sound’, a tiny mote of dust in the sky, soon lost to our vision, but human broadcasts penetrate the vast distances of space in a way that human beings themselves cannot. The earliest human broadcasts, travelling at the speed of sound, may (without degradation) have reached around 100 light years distant by the end of the first decade of the 21st century, though it would take alien intelligences to have developed receiving equipment far beyond the tolerances and sensitivity of even the most advanced arrays on Earth to be able to hear (and later, watch) them. *Contact* plays a strange double game in its opening minutes: while the opening effects sequence emphasises physical *distance* (the time taken for signals, at the speed of sound, to travel across space), the images of the girl at her ham radio emphasises *instantaneity* of ‘contact’, that distance *in space* is countermanded by broadcast technologies, where a form of tele-presence makes it seem as though someone a thousand miles distant is sitting right next to you. The physical realities of sound, distance and time are then subject, in *Contact*, to a wider fantasy of instantaneity of contact, one that will have increasingly metaphysical (as well as psychological/ emotional) implications as the narrative progresses.

Despite its Anglophone and North American bias, *Contact*’s opening is of particular interest because it reads contemporary history through sound broadcast technologies: radio (wireless), in particular. The universe itself, of course, emanates radio-frequency signals as part of its fabric, not only from sources such as pulsars but as part of background radiation, and the Search for Extra-Terrestrial Life program

(SETI) has used radio-telescope arrays to try to filter out possible extra-terrestrial transmissions from the background ‘noise’ of the universe. By focusing on radio, *Contact* emphasises the fundamental contiguity between human activity (sound broadcasts) and the universe itself, and marks human history through its audio footprint, almost as if human life began with radio, Marconi as Adam. Extra-terrestrial scientists, perhaps, will gauge human ‘intelligence’ (or otherwise) through its capacity to produce audio transmissions. Paradoxically, Earth becomes *visible* as a ‘planet of sound’.

Radio is one of the sound technologies which came into being in the second half of the 19th century, which also included telegraphy, the telephone, and recording via phonograph cylinders (principles later developed into the gramophone/ phonograph, and audio tape). Jonathan Sterne, in *The Audible Past* (2003), has argued that sound recording is continuous with the 19th century’s cultures of death, in that it seeks to *preserve* the voice of the dead subject and prevent decay. Sterne connects this to the development of canning technologies in the food industry and also to the arts of embalming. In a sense, preservation of the voice is then a way to efface or overcome time and its depredations (allowing that the recording technologies themselves do not degrade over time). Sterne argues that emblematic of the reifying imperatives of what he calls (derived from Matei Calinescu) ‘bourgeois modernity’, a way of ‘managing time’ itself: sound recordings offer ‘repeatable time within a carefully bounded frame’.(1) However, Sterne goes on to suggest that ‘the scheme of permanence [...] was essentially hyperbole, a Victorian fantasy. Repeatability from moment to moment was not the same thing as preservation for all time’.(2) Recorded sound offered the possibility of repetition, of *playback* of the voice after death; however, playback itself, on cylinders or gramophone records, relies on the same technologies of *material inscription* that constitute recording: the needle touches the vinyl groove, and in touching, marks it, degrades it. Repeated playback is another slow fade into white noise, undifferentiation, and death.

The term ‘white noise’, which will become increasingly important to this article, is drawn from the frequency spectrum. Within the audio range, we hear different tones or notes when a particular frequency length predominates. When all frequencies within the audible range are equally present, resulting in a ‘flat’ sound spectrum, then what the human ear hears is ‘white noise’. White noise is undifferentiated sound, deemed ‘white’ through analogy with light, where the presence of all visible frequencies results in white light. The relation of transmission or signal to white noise is one that has haunted analogue sound reproduction technologies from their inception.

Most notably, Jeffrey Sconce has investigated the history of this ‘haunting’ with regard to sound and vision technologies. In *Haunted Media* (2000), Sconce outlines three recurrent ‘cultural fantasies’ that have accompanied the development of telecommunications technologies: (1) ‘these media enable an uncanny form of disembodiment’; (2) the imagination of a ‘sovereign electronic world’, an ‘electronic elsewhere’; and (3) ‘the anthropomorphization of media technology’, most visible in a fascination with androids and cyborgs.(3) In his chapter on radio, Sconce suggests that ‘enthusiastic celebration of the emerging medium [was accompanied and challenged by texts] suggesting an eerie and even sinister undercurrent to the new electronic worlds forged by wireless’.(4) In fact, we might suggest that sound broadcast technologies enabled an uncanny form of *embodiment* through tele-presence, the belief that the other was somehow present in the room as you spoke to them via radio or telephone. In either sense, we can ascertain that telecommunication technologies disrupted the ‘metaphysics of presence’ diagnosed by Jacques Derrida and others as central to Western metaphysics, a privileging of speech over writing, of the voice over text, that makes the *voice* the embodiment of truth and of authenticity. In this *phonocentrism*, as Derrida called it, writing is seen to be derived from a pre-existing orality, a ‘natural’ form of communication that is prior to ‘the fateful violence of the political institution’.(5) Derrida, of course, sought to undo this binary which privileged voice over writing, and argued that writing preceded, and was

the condition and ground of speech. After the advent of telecommunications technologies, voice itself becomes disembodied, no longer physically connected to a subject who speaks. Tele-presence is at one and the same time presence and *not*-presence, offering the fantasy of ‘instantaneity of contact’ but at the same time emphasising that the *other speaker* is not there.

When talking with Bernard Stiegler about television in *Echographies of Television* (2002), Derrida asserts that technologies of the image are bound up with acts of ‘magic’ or ‘faith’, ‘by our relation of essential incompetence to technical operation’.(6) ‘For if we don’t know how something works’, Derrida continues,

our knowledge is incommensurable to the immediate perception that attunes us to technical efficacy, to the fact that “it works”; we see that “it works”, but even if we *know* this, we don’t see how it “works”; seeing and knowing are incommensurable here. [...] And this is what makes our experience so strange. We are spectralized by the shot, captured or possessed by spectrality in advance. [...] What has [...] constantly haunted me in this logic of the spectre is that it regularly exceeds all the oppositions between visible and invisible, sensible and insensible. A spectre is both visible and invisible, both phenomenal and nonphenomenal.(7)

Although Derrida uses the discourse of visibility here, his addition of ‘sensible and insensible’ crucially extends the idea of the ‘specter’ to the frequency range of audio, in its disruption of presence. In his attempt to situate the problematic of how telecommunication technologies in relation to human knowledge, Derrida allows media to escape discourses of science, the rational (or of knowledge itself) and so it enters the numinous, the ‘electronic elsewhere’, where our relation to it *can only be* uncanny (and/ or theological: we must *believe* that it works, even if we don’t know how it works, a ‘technical efficacy’ that must always elude us.) Telecommunications technologies, broadcast media, are then spectralized, ‘haunted’, by this strangeness.

In terms of the developing communication technologies of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, both *transmission* and *reproduction* of sound are ‘haunted’ by ghosts. Recording the voice, according to Sterne, is part of a culture of preservation and memorialization of the dead; Joe Banks, in ‘Rorschach Audio’, reports that ‘Edison and Marconi both believed that radio technology might enable contact with the afterlife’.(8) In his short story ‘Wireless’ – analysed by Sconce and Warner – Rudyard Kipling imagines a young man who, entering into a kind of fugue state, becomes a kind of human ‘receiver’ (or we might say ‘medium’) for the transmission of one of Keats’ poems, which he writes down as if transcribing a message: a poem the young man does not consciously know. The mystery of this act is maintained by the short story until the end: the act of transmission itself, a kind of aetheric emanation picked by a ‘sensitive’, remains unexplained. Here we might also return to the film *Contact*. The young girl, Ellie Alloway, asks her father, if she had powerful enough equipment, ‘Could I talk to ... the Moon?’, going on to add ‘Jupiter?’, ‘Saturn?’, and then, ‘Mom?’. When her father unexpectedly dies, the loss of her mother is compounded, and after the father’s funeral, immediately prior to a cut across time to the older Ellie (played by Jodie Foster), we see the girl, once again transmitting on her short-wave radio, calling ‘Dad, this is Ellie: come back? Dad, are you there? Come back.’ Talking across space is twice encoded as talking to the ‘electronic elsewhere’, hoping to hear the voices of the dead.

In the film *Frequency* (2000), John Sullivan (Jim Caviziel) plays a man who lost his own father Frank (Dennis Quaid) in a fire when he was young. It begins in a similar way to *Contact*: on the soundtrack, dislocated phrases from radio broadcasts are heard while the visual track shows image from space, here the plumes of solar flares that will create unusual atmospheric conditions on Earth on two days 30 years

apart, 10 October 1969 and 1999. Effects-shots of the aurora borealis behind the Queensborough Bridge in New York emphasise both material locatedness (this is a New York story: Frank was a fireman while John is a detective in the NYPD) *and* strangeness, the presence of the uncanny, the sky ‘haunted’ by the lights. The bridge also symbolises the connection between the two time-periods, as the film intercuts between them, and largely focuses on the relationship between Frank and his young son. The technological ‘bridge’ between the time-periods is short-wave radio, and the backyard mast is prominently displayed against the borealis several times. *Frequency* matches time *through* space: John still lives in the house he grew up in, while his widowed mother lives elsewhere, and the film regularly intercuts the older John pacing around the house, himself haunting its spaces, with images of the family life he lost upon the death of his father.(9) The ham radio itself, discovered in the NYFD trunk of his father, becomes an uncanny object; its old valves fail, but the receiver seems to start into life of its own accord when Frank begins to broadcast on it in 1969, and John receives its messages across time. When John informs his father that he is to die in a warehouse fire on October 12th, he alters the timeline (we see direct evidence of this when contact with his father on the radio causes his father to burn the desk he is sitting at, the burn mark appearing under John’s hand as he speaks): his father survives, but it is only at the end of the film (after a long diversion into a serial-killer procedural narrative) that a kind of wish-fulfilment of emotional restitution is enacted. John’s final ‘new’ timeline gifts him with the family life he lost once his father died: *Frequency*’s imagination of haunted radio directly undoes the trauma of loss.

Both *Contact* and *Frequency*, although science fiction films (one a ‘first contact’ narrative, the other a time-paradox story), can both be said to incorporate elements of what is known as ‘EVP’, or electronic voice phenomena. This is a focus of para-psychological research whereby it is understood that the ‘voices’ of the dead can be found imprinted upon the ambient sounds (or ‘noise’) produced when recording in an ordinary empty room. This began in the mid-1930s with the artist Attila von Szalay, who, in his darkroom, heard ‘the voice of his deceased brother calling his name.’(10) After unsuccessful attempts to record these voices on a phonograph, he was finally successful when using a reel-to-reel tape recorder in the 1950s. This technological advance is important. Around the same time, Friedrich Jürgenson, a Swedish documentary film-maker, attempted to record birdsong (also on tape recorder) in his garden, but found, on playback, that he ‘heard his dead father’s voice and then the spirit of his deceased wife calling his name’.(11) Upon publishing his findings in 1959, his book *Radio Contact with the Dead* was read by the Jungian psychologist and philosopher, Dr Konstantin Raudive. Raudive’s book *Breakthrough* (1971) was literally that in the popular imagination, and is a curious example of what might be termed ‘spiritualism in the age of electronic reproduction.’ The book’s subtitle, ‘An Amazing Experiment in Electronic Communication with the Dead’ marks its significance as a ‘scientific’ text that purports to reveal the intersection of spectrality, life-after-death communication and analogue recording devices. In the book, Raudive ‘hears’ or decodes voices of the dead (‘speaking’ in English, German, and Raudive’s native Latvian) emanating from the background hiss and rumble of recorded ambient sound: he asks questions of an empty room and records the ‘answers’.

Raudive’s work is a common touchstone for critics considering haunted media. For Sconce, Raudive presents himself and the EVP project as radically antithetical to Freudian depth-psychology:

the Raudive voices did speak of an immortal essence that transcends alienating models of Darwin, Freud, Sartre, and all other demystifying assaults on the transcendental dimension of the human psyche. The irony, of course, is that Raudive remystified the soul through the validating authority of an electronic technology.(12)

However, Sconce asserts a fundamental homology between Freud's and Raudive's intentions: 'At their core, both of these 'interpretative' sciences shared the hope that their practices overcome *the trauma of a profound loss*'.(13) Joe Banks, in 'Rorschach Audio', takes an extremely sceptical view, suggesting that 'EVP experimenters are psychologists who have misunderstood their own work; [...] [they] are inadvertently reproducing acoustic projection experiments', making the analogy to Rorschach ink-blot tests.(14) Mike Kelley, in 'An Academic Cut-Up' also refers to Rorschach blots, but understands Rorschach's experiments both as technological Spiritualism and as a way-station in the history of twentieth-century experiments in sound, particularly in the musical avant-garde: 'one is hyperconscious of the fact that the distortion of the recording process [in EVP] is the primary experience,' he suggests.(15) My own reading of Raudive's work would emphasise three main elements:

- (1) the centrality of *naming* in EVP. Von Szalay hears his brother call his name; they call Raudive by name, over and over again: Konstantin, Koste, Kostin. Naming, interpellation, calling into being: a crucial way of making meaning in EVP seems to circulate around the name, the act of being identified by EVP event, call into *presence* by an act of hearing/ decoding.
- (2) The centrality of trauma to the experience. Von Szalay and Jürgenson hear the voices of dead relatives; Raudive's recently departed mother looms large in the catalogue of voices, and she is the first catalogued figure to be identified in in *Breakthrough*; on reading transcriptions of the EVP events, Raudive 'hears' many dead friends.(16)
- (3) Thirdly, the common technological device here is magnetic audio tape.

Where Kittler notes the gramophone as a storage device / externalisations of memory becomes a metaphor for a figure for human consciousness itself, *tape* has different qualities: 'tapes can execute any possible manipulation of data because they are equipped with recording, reading, and erasing heads, as well as with forward and reverse motion'.(17) (Kittler also notes, *pace* Paul Virilio, that it is war, here the experiments by BASF and AEG used by the Abwehr in World War Two, that accelerate magnetic tape production, rather than steel tape, towards general or consuming usage in the post-war period.)(18) As N. Katherine Hayles has it, in *How We Became Posthuman* (1999), 'audio tape was a technology of inscription, but with the crucial difference that he admitted erasure and rewriting':

Whereas the phonograph produced objects that could be consumed only in the manufactured form, magnetic tape allows the consumer to be a producer as well. The switches activating the powerful and paradoxical technoconceptual actors of repetition and mutation, presence and absence, were in the hands of the masses, at least the masses who could afford the equipment.(19)

Hayles writes of how 'audio tape may already be reaching old age, fading from the marketplace as it is replaced by compact discs, computer hypermedia, and the like'.(20) The compact cassette is now one of Bruce Sterling's 'dead media', and its successor, the CD, is also on the way to obsolescence.(21) However, it is the very imperfections of magnetic tape, the 'wow' and 'flutter' of the thin, flexible tape passing over the heads, which renders it perfect as a 'haunted' technology. Like the 'ghosting' of analogue television signals (soon also to be obsolete), the imperfection of the analogue media artefact is part of its quality, its form. It is, of course, it is very imperfection as a recording media – its hiss, its rumble, its flutter – which is the very condition of possibility for EVP. As documentary features on the DVD of *White Noise* point out, without the hiss of tape – or in contemporary technology, used by EVP experts, the noise generated by the hardware of solid state Dictaphones – they can be no coalescing of the EVP 'voice', no recording of the phenomenon.(22) Without *noise*, there physically can be no *signal*.

The main association for popular research into EVP is now called the Association Transcommunication. From the ATransC website, it is clear that the crucial motivations for the EVP practitioner is to contact a lost loved one: to undo trauma. One of their projects is called 'Big Circle', which attempts to contact the lost loved ones who now reside in the 'etheric'. Its directors, Lisa and Tom Butler encourage DIY: all you need is a tape deck (portable compact cassette recorder), microphone, and if possible a computer with spectrum analyzers and filters and other sound processors to enhance the listening experience, to hear the voices.(23) As Raudive himself writes, 'the ear cannot hear the voices without technical aids'.(24) It is clear from the AA-EVP/ATransC work shown on the documentary that the voice phenomena are much simpler to decode than Raudive's: the voices of monoglot (English, in the USA) and seem much more immediately comprehensible. (Indeed, on page 19 of *Breakthrough*, it seems that the polyglot discourse is a condition of a claim to paranormal status for a voice event: polyglot + 'sensible meaning' = 'voice is paranormal'). It is the democratisation (and technologisation) of mediumship that is so striking here – this is not a spectacular event, complete with female medium, ectoplasm, table rapping, or other visual spectacle: it is seemingly demystified, as simple as taping while asking questions of an empty room.

Where, then, do these voices come *from*? Kelley offers several means by which to explain the EVP phenomena. The first is that they are indeed some kind of extra-sensible emanations, 'the tortured voices of those in Hell, [...] the taunts of demons, or [...] the by-products of some numbing mental process that occurs after death'; the second, that they are psycho-acoustic patternings of geography: 'the haunted house, the poltergeist phenomenon, are explained as a result of the continuing presence of traumatized spirits or stored psychic energy, associated with a given place'.(25) William Burroughs, in his own essay on Raudive, 'It Belongs to the Cucumbers', is highly sceptical, and suggests that the voices are more likely 'imprinted on the tape by electromagnetic energy generated by the unconscious minds of the researchers or people connected with them'.(26) I find a third possibility more suggestive: that EVP phenomena are the coming-to-attention of the human ear to the 'planet of sound' around us. Kelley writes:

We are programmed in such a way to screen out as much extraneous information as possible; otherwise we would not be able to deal with the amount of external stimuli that constantly bombards us. A tape recorder does much the same thing that putting a seashell, or a simple tube, up to our ear does – it makes us aware of the amount of white noise that continually surrounds us.(27)

Jonathan Crary, in *Suspensions of Perception* (2001) argued that the idea of attention became increasingly investigated in the fields of both psychology and optics in the 19th century. This is because of the perceived tendency in human beings (particularly workers, it should be noted) towards *distraction*, in what Crary calls 'an emergent economic system that demanded attentiveness of a subject in a wide range of new productive and spectacular tasks, but whose internal movement was continually eroding the basis of any disciplinary attentiveness'.(28) The conditions of a 'modern', industrial, increasingly consumption- as well as production-oriented economy, pulled the human subject in two directions: firstly, the bombardment of what Walter Benjamin has called the 'shock' of modern existence (urban living, machinery, speed, advertising, etc) creates an increasingly distracted subject in an increasingly kaleidoscopic world; and secondly, that the very economic conditions that produce this kind of world require a working subject who is able to maintain long periods of attentiveness to complex and repetitive tasks (over a 10- or 12-hour working day in a factory, for instance). The disciplining of *visual* attention that Crary diagnoses can be extended to the field of sound reproduction and transmission; *aural* attention is required to prevent a kind of distraction of the senses through sonic overload in a world where 'the skies are filled with electro-magnetic slums', 'aural garbage [...] aether talk [...] and] dead city radio transmissions'.(29) EVP, then, in Gothicised form, makes this disciplining of attention itself 'visible': it

is what we do not, or cannot, hear. The image that is repeated continuously in *Contact*, of Ellie Alloway concentrating on the sounds transmitted through her headphones ('no-one listens any more' says her immediate superior) is emblematic of the necessity of aural attention in modernity: Ellie must shut out the very 'planet of sound' that the film begins with in order to contact the 'electronic elsewhere'.

## II.

Fictional or filmic EVP narratives are, like the phenomenon itself, organised around overcoming 'the trauma of a profound loss'.<sup>(30)</sup> *Contact*, which, despite being about the search for extra-terrestrial intelligence is a classical EVP narrative, expresses Ellie Alloway's search for transmissions explicitly as a recuperation of the loss of her mother and father, and when she does indeed achieve 'contact' with extra-terrestrials, they appear in the very physical form of her Dad. *Frequency* also has at its centre the loss of a parent, where radio-transmitted EVP phenomena become stitched into a time-paradox narrative where the trauma of loss may not only be overcome, but *undone*. Both of these films concentrate upon *audio* transmissions, but another, better-known film that incorporates 'spirit voices', Tobe Hooper's 1982 film *Poltergeist*, has at its centre the 'snow' of a television screen after transmission on a channel has ended (in the days of analogue signals and 'closedown'), the audio white noise accompanied by the unsettling light of a cathode-ray tube broadcasting no signal. The poster for the film featured the young girl Carol Anne (Heather O'Rourke) sitting directly in front of this television, listening intently to 'voices' only she could hear. The tag-line for the film, dialogue spoken by Carol Anne, is: 'They're here.'

Where *Contact* and *Frequency* concentrated upon the loss of the father-figure, the crucial triangulation in *Poltergeist* is female, and maternal. While the father Steven Freeling (Craig T. Nelson) has been morally compromised by his complicity on dubious land deals that have sited housing developments on old Native American burial grounds (a failure of paternal authority more common in the films of producer Steven Spielberg), it is the daughter Carol Anne who becomes the subject of the malign attentions of the poltergeists. When she is taken to the 'elsewhere' in this film, the family call upon the services of a team of para-psychological researchers from UC Irvine. When the 'scientists', with technological gear of high-end EVP experimenters (video and audio recording, motion sensors, and so on) cannot solve the problem of poltergeist activity, they call in the medium, Tangina Barrons (Zelda Rubinstein). It is she who realises that the phenomena are 'spirits' who have not gone into the 'light' of the hereafter, and that a malign entity has captured both Carol Anne and the attention of spirits, preventing them from 'passing'; and it is she who sends Carol Anne's mother Diana (JoBeth Williams) into the 'portal' to retrieve her daughter. When they emerge back into the 'real' of the house, mother and daughter are covered in some kind of ectoplasm, a (re)birth-fluid that emphasises feminine and maternal materiality. The core of *Poltergeist* is the recuperation of the mother-daughter bond through the ministrations of the female medium/ midwife, preserver of arcane knowledge and practices that always-already escape the scientizing discourses of the UC Irvine team (who are led by a female scientist, but whose practices are resolutely coded as masculine: rational, technological, and deeply flawed).

These three films, then, can be constellated as a 'parental' mode of EVP narrative, in which trauma is focused upon the parent/child relationship and emotional dynamic. Another group of EVP narratives, which will take up the remainder of the essay, are Orphean in nature. Orpheus has, in the twentieth century, been a myth recurrently taken up by artists and writers who wish to explore artistic creation and transmission, but also the imperatives of loss and recuperation. In his Afterword to his translation of Rainer Maria Rilke's 'Orpheus' sequence of sonnets, the poet Don Paterson writes that Rilke wrote the poems at such speed that it seemed to Rilke as though they were being broadcast from elsewhere (as in Kipling's 'Wireless'), where poetic creation took the form of an 'enigmatic dictation'. This exogamous conception of writing leads Paterson to propose the poet as a kind of medium:

Someone so sensitive that they become not only a lightning rod for all the crackling static of the culture, but also a satellite-dish, a ‘receiver’ (to use a Rilkean favourite) for things a less precisely attuned and calibrated sensibility would never be aware of. These individuals possess no supernatural powers, but do have abnormally strong sense of what’s on the wind for us.(31)

Orpheus is, of course, a mythic figure for the poet, one whose gift is bound up with loss. Orpheus, once a priest of Dionysus, is, at the time of his marriage, a priest of Apollo. The son of a river god (or perhaps Apollo) and Calliope (the Muse of epic poetry), Orpheus is gifted with a supernatural ability to play the lyre: his song charms the trees (who uproot to come nearer the singer), softens stones, alters nature itself. On his wedding day, his bride Eurydice, fleeing the bee-keeper Aristaeus, treads upon a snake, is bitten, and dies. The grief-stricken Orpheus thereby descends into the Underworld, and through song, persuades Persephone and Hades to allow Eurydice to accompany him back to the upper world, on one condition: that he does not look back at his wife as they ascend. Unfortunately, as they near the upper world, Orpheus does look back, either in fear, or anxiety, or through love of his wife – and her shade retreats to the underworld. Despite his efforts, she may not be released a second time. In some versions of the myth, Orpheus then forswears the company of women and takes young male lovers. Precipitated by this rejection, women of a Dionysian cult, in an intoxicated frenzy, tear Orpheus to pieces; his head and lyre float down the river, still lamenting the loss of Eurydice, until they are washed ashore on Lesbos, while his shade is reunited with Eurydice in the underworld. The head of Orpheus becomes an oracle until Apollo, fearing competition with his own oracle at Delphi, silences the head and places Orpheus among the stars.

The figure of Orpheus has, from the Medieval period, through the Renaissance, Romanticism and to Modern and contemporary literature, has been re-imagined as: (a) an emblematic narrative of loss of the loved one; (b) a figure of the transcendent power of art and poetry; and (c) the imagination of the boundary between the real or quotidian and the transcendent or divine. Contemporary SF, fantasy and gothic/ horror fictions have used an Orphean narrative pattern, of a journey to an ‘underworld’, to construct narratives of anxiety, trauma and loss. These include films such as *Solaris* (2002), where a voyage to a sentient star, and thereby contact a transcendent other, is patterned on the male protagonist’s search for the restoration of his lost wife, horror/ SF crossover texts such as *Event Horizon* (1997), where the scientist Weir’s interest in the demonic ship is predicated on undoing the trauma of his wife's suicide; and, in different ways, both *White Noise* (2005) and *Frozen* (2005), films I will consider in more detail shortly.

While all these films connect EVP phenomenon with loss, there are significant differences, which can be expressed in tabular form. (Bold indicates video-based EVP; italics signify audio-based EVP.)

	Parental	Orphean
Female	<b>Poltergeist</b> <i>Contact</i>	<b>Frozen</b>
Male	<i>Frequency</i>	<b>White Noise</b> <i>Orphee</i>

In Jean Cocteau's *Orphée* (1950), Jean Marais plays Orpheus, a poet who fears losing his gifts, and who suffers the loss of his wife when Orpheus's Death (personified by Maria Casares) falls in love with him, and deceives him by sending messages via car radio which he then copies down and presents to the public, to great success, as his own work. Some of these are numbers (referring to the coded broadcasts of the BBC to French Resistance fighters in Occupied France in World War 2), but some have a dislocated, surreal quality: 'A single glass of water lights up the world'; 'Jupiter enlightens those he would destroy'. The exogenous nature of Orpheus's poetry – it is actually composed by his great (and deceased) young rival, Cégeste – connects Cocteau's *Orphée* to Rilke, but also to EVP: these are disembodied voices, calling via sound broadcast technologies, with mysterious intention. Orpheus asks the angel Heurtebise 'Where can they be coming from?' It is, of course, from the 'electronic elsewhere'. Cocteau's Orpheus does indeed retrieve his Eurydice from the underworld, and although the prohibition about looking back at his wife remains intact, this version of the narrative does not end in disaster (and dismemberment), but in a kind of triumph over Death, albeit mysterious and problematic.

In *White Noise* (2005), communication devices abound: cell phones, answer phones, TV, video, computer screens all feature heavily in the *mise-en-scène*. These devices, lyres for the electronic age, allow a bridge to be formed between quotidian and other- or under-worlds. The haunted nature of telephonic/ telegraphic communication is figured directly as communication with ghosts, and particularly with the spirit of a lost wife. Michael Keaton plays Jonathan Rivers, an architect (the sign of ratio, of Apollo) whose second wife tells him she is pregnant before she drives into the city for a meeting. She never returns. Her car is found by the river with a flat tyre, and her body is eventually discovered up-river, taken there by the tide. In the protagonist's name and this location we find reference to the Styx/ Lethe imagery that is much more overt in *Frozen*, but also the birth imagery that Brian Jarvis notes as significant in the J-horror variant on haunted tape and the invasion-horror narrative, *Ringu*. (32) (In *Frozen*, Annie, the lost sister, has also recently had a child; we see the baby with the 'abandoned' father.) Ultimately, the narrative descends into both spirit-invasion horror (malignant spirit entities as in *Poltergeist*) and, in a curious genre-swerve, serial killer narrative, where the wife's death was murder, not accidental, and is one of a sequence that the serial-killer offers up to the malign spirit entities. *Frozen* makes the same swerve when revealing, at the point of the female protagonist's death at his hands, that the abandoned father of his sister's child is in fact the murderer of both sisters.

At first, in *White Noise*, televisual imaging technology (home movies shown on TV) are not connected to EVP. As in the figure of John Anderton in *Minority Report* (2002), whose watching of holographic images of his lost son are meant to comfort but merely compound the trauma of loss, Rivers seeks out videotapes of his life with his lost wife as an index of unrecuperated trauma. The promise of all these haunted technologies is, ultimately, the restoration of a form of life to the dead: as Terry Castle notes in *The Female Thermometer*, the phantasmagoria entrepreneur/inventor Etienne-Gaspard Robertson, when introducing the show 'emerged, spectrelike, from the gloom, and addressing the audience, offered to conjure up the spirits of their dead loved ones'.(33) The bridge formed by these technologies, as we saw with *Frequency*, is not only to the spirit world, but also to the past, the time in which the loved one was not lost.

This literal nostalgia, this return home to a time before loss/trauma, is indicated in the *mise-en-scène* of *White Noise*. Rivers' home and office are photographed with a cool, grey-blue palette: chrome, brushed steel and glass predominate. After he moves to an apartment following his wife's death, this becomes still more emphasised, the blue light of cathode ray screens reflecting from glass-brick walls. When Rivers is

approached by an EVP specialist, Raymond Price (Ian McNeice), who tells him Rivers' wife has contacted him, the initially sceptical Rivers visits Price's home. The *mise-en-scène* here is markedly different: the clapboard house contains rooms lit in shades of red and brown, the space cluttered, old rugs on the floor. Unlike Rivers apartment, this base is homely, *heimlich* perhaps, although part of the clutter is the EVP equipment itself: tapes, video recorders, computer, and a DAT player. The room bespeaks the past, and the technology of the past; it is as though Price has heard voices through a crystal radio set in his front room (echoing the ham radio activities of Ellie Alloway in *Contact*). In a sense, this is exactly what he has been doing; EVP as do-it-yourself radiophonics.<sup>(34)</sup> If Price's house is homely, then Rivers deliberately dislocates himself from 'home'. He moves from a house shared with his lost wife to a cold, modern apartment building in the city. Perhaps the house is haunted by the memories of his wife, and indeed it is here that Rivers is seen watching home movies; and the move to the blank new apartment becomes an attempt to escape these ghosts. But it is here, through tape and EVP that the ghost of his wife manifests itself. It is the very blankness of the modern apartment that calls forth the ghost.

This narrative, like others mentioned above, combines Orpheus motifs, technology and the numinous or transcendent. They place a male questing protagonist at the centre of narrative agency. In the figures of von Szalay, Jurgenson, Raudive, and in *White Noise* Rivers and Price, EVP is represented as a male activity, the technology perhaps inverting the paradigm of female mediumship. As Sconce and Marina Warner note, from the Fox sisters on, there is an interesting implication of gender in Spiritualism – a gender politics. Sconce writes: 'spiritualism empowered women to speak in public, often about very controversial issues facing the nation'.<sup>(35)</sup> In spirit photography, it is William Crookes or William Hope photographing female mediums; and in spiritualism, the female *does not speak*: she is a medium for others. The media (photography/ tape) that will prove the scientific fact of the existence of post mortem life (spirits, voices) is coded as male; the mediums that are the focus are female. In *White Noise*, Rivers visits a blind female seer, a medium, who cautions him against EVP, warning him not to 'meddle'. The conflict between the archetypal female medium, and the technophile male EVP experimenter, bespeaks a kind of gender problematic in these Orpheus narratives, and perhaps an attempt to wrest the figuring of the 'electronic elsewhere' into the realm of the masculine.

*Frozen* (2005), on the other hand, is certainly a text which uses EVP motifs – the imprinting of a strange image on to surveillance CCTV tape – but in the service of a narrative which focuses on female, and sisterly, loss. When Kath, the surviving sister (Shirley Henderson) of a disappeared woman visits the alleyway where CCTV images of her sister were captured, she has a vision whereupon she stands upon tidal sands, while what she takes to be her sister walks upon a sandbank across and inlet or creek. As the film progresses, and the number of these visions increases, the Orpheus patterning becomes more apparent: a boat is seen, rowed by the blind ferryman Charon, and when she discusses her visions with a counsellor/priest (Roshan Seth) he explicitly decodes them as a Greco-Roman underworld.<sup>(36)</sup>

The counsellor/priest's discourse runs directly counter to the scientific, demystifying impulses of Raudive and other EVP experimenters. The priest says to Kath: 'some things are beyond understanding and we just have to accept them as mysteries'. At the same time, when Kath shows him a printout of the uncanny image on the CCTV tape, in return he shows her a Rorschach ink blot, indicating that her meaning-making, of Annie as a dead and her visions as uncanny, is faulty. Later in the film, the image on the 'blot' becomes clearer, like a very slowly developing Polaroid photograph. It is revealed to be a close up of a two-shot taken while Annie and Kath were on a roller-coaster, their happy faces pressed together. Whilst Kath only finds herself, not Annie, wandering the underworld sands in her visions, this image does suggest (albeit sentimentally) that the two sisters are reunited in death. Through Kath's visions, which we see as a cinematic 'real', the afterlife is presented as a kind of truth or reality, just as in EVP.

*Frozen* returns to the figure of the female visionary, though Kath's mediumship is overtly bound up with trauma and loss, and possible psychological disintegration. Kath ends up 'channelling' her own death, seeing her own face, when Jonathan Rivers in *White Noise* sees the deaths of others. He does not see his own death, even though his EVP visions become proleptic/prophetic/prophylactic in form. However, the last image of *White Noise* is Rivers, with his wife, amidst the visual snow of blank videotape playback, looking back out of the screen at us. Where Kath and Annie are bound up with each other, *White Noise's* final visual gesture is to turn to the audience.

Why? The film is explicitly a cautionary tale, and on-screen titles warn that one in 12 EVP events are threatening in nature. It is also a warning against the Orpheus narrative, of looking back over one's shoulder, of nostalgia. After Rivers' funeral, his son, first wife and her current husband sit in their car. The radio comes on of its own accord, and we hear Keaton's voice, as an EVP, say 'I'm sorry' to son who, somewhat curiously, seems pleased by this event. What is striking about certain sequences in this film is not the use of EVP, nor the spirit-invasion narratives, but the images of the son, playing alone, on the father, in another room, watched blank tape in a search for his wife. In inhabiting nostalgia, in wanting to restore the past, in an inability to overcome the trauma of loss, Rivers neglects his son, and present time. The real locus of anxiety (and pathos) in *White Noise* is not the bereaved lover, but the neglectful/forgetful father.

### III.

There is one film that uses EVP motifs I have deliberately refrained from mentioning so far: M. Knight Shyamalan's *The Sixth Sense* (1999). There is indeed a 'lost wife' in this film, but, of course, the 'twist' in this narrative is that Dr Malcolm Crowe (Bruce Willis), the psychologist who treats a traumatised child who 'sees dead people' (Cole Sear, played by Haley Joel Osment) is himself dead, only a ghost. Cole tells Crowe that the ghosts 'only see what they want to see', and while this bears upon Crowe's ongoing self-delusion as a ghost who believes himself to be alive, it also indicates the failure of rationality and scientific/ medical discourse to deal with the real cause of Cole's trauma: he really does see dead people. As the narrative nears its end, Dr Crowe realises that the causes of his own death lie in the roots of his rational world-view. His home invaded by a traumatised former patient, Crowe is shot, and the film seems to take place after his recovery, but in fact occurs after his death. Crowe 'fails' Vincent Grey (Mark Wahlberg) because he can only see Vincent's symptoms as internal and psychological terms, whereas the truth lies externally: he, too, contacts the dead. On playing back a tape of an interview with Grey, Crowe hears what he has blocked out all this time, the voices that haunt and torture Grey. The EVP manifestation finally makes clear to Crowe the limits of his own discourse; and this way is the path not only towards understanding his own condition (as ghost), but a form of healing for himself and Cole, who stands in and recuperates the damage that he could not undo with Vincent Grey. *The Sixth Sense* is then another recuperative narrative, and as he leaves the film (and Earth), Crowe is rewarded with the knowledge of his wife's ongoing love for him.

It is important to note, by way of conclusion, that the films I have been considering here are mainly grouped around the years 1997-2005, with *Orphée* and *Poltergeist* preceding them. All the films deal with analogue technologies: radio, audio tape, video, CCTV. These analogue technologies (excepting CCTV) were in decline in this period, and most have now been supplanted by digital formats: digital and web radio; vinyl records and audio tape by cd and digital downloads; video tape by dvd and video files. (Analogue television signals are being 'switched over' to digital in the UK at the time of writing, nearing the end of a process that has taken several years.) For audio tape especially, a nostalgia-inflected culture has developed, around the 'mixtape' as a particular form of transmission and distribution (consumer-led)

of music, and vinyl has continued to be supported by DJ and remix culture. At the end of their time as consumer technologies of sound and visual reproduction, it seems that analogue technologies particularly became haunted by the ‘ghosts’ of nostalgia and by the very imperfections that rendered them *unheimlich*. The degrading qualities of reproduction of audio and video tape or vinyl records inserted them into history as material objects, and personal history as bearers of the marks of playback (particularly evident in the scratches on vinyl), but the associations conjured by this entry into history and memory themselves produced ghosts.

As I have argued in the course of this essay, it is the very properties of these media which are the ground and condition of their ‘haunted’ phenomena, the imperfections of aural and visual reproduction. Without noise, as I have stated, there can be no signal. Does the sonic ‘cleanness’ of digital reproduction mean that communication technologies will no longer be uncanny? The use of digital sound recorders by contemporary EVP experimenters suggests not: computers, hard disks or digital cameras have their own ambient footprints. There is a difference between analogue and digital reproduction; however, Bernard Stiegler suggests that both can create anxiety:

Analogico-digital technology continues and amplifies a process of suspension [that interrupts one state of things and imposes another] that began a long time ago, in which the *analog* photograph was itself only a singular epoch. And so the process in ancient, but the current phase of suspension – in the form of digital photography – engenders an anxiety and a doubt which are particularly interesting, but particularly threatening.(37)

It is, then, perhaps sound and visual reproduction itself which is haunted, rather than specific technologies. In digital artifacts and glitches, we may still see ghosts.

- 1 Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2003), p.310.
- 2 Sterne, p.332.
- 3 Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2000), pp.8-9.
- 4 Sconce, p.62.
- 5 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (1967), trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p.36.
- 6 Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler, *Echographies of Television*, trans. Jennifer Bajorek (Cambridge: Polity, 2002), p.117.
- 7 Derrida and Stiegler, p.117.
- 8 Joe Banks, 'Rorschach Audio: Ghost Voices and Perceptual Creativity', *Leonardo Music Journal*, 11: 2001, 77-83 (p.83).
- 9 In John Cheever's 'The Enormous Radio' (1947), a radio set picks up the conversations of other families in an apartment block, allowing the owners of the radio to eavesdrop on others. The result of this 'haunting' is that the couple's own suppressed history, its secrets, come to the surface once more. John Cheever, 'The Enormous Radio', *The Enormous Radio and Other stories* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1953)
- 10 Sconce, p.84.
- 11 Sconce, p.84.
- 12 Sconce, p.90.
- 13 Sconce, p.90; p.91.
- 14 Banks, p.80.
- 15 Mike Kelley, 'An Academic Cut-up, in Easily Digestible Paragraph-Size Chunks; Or, the New King of Pop, Dr. Konstantin Raudive', *Grey Room* 11, Spring 2003, 22-43 (p.38).
- 16 Konstantin Raudive, *Breakthrough: An Amazing Experiment in Electronic Communication With The Dead*, trans Nadia Fowler (New York: Taplinger, 1971), p.35.
- 17 Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (1986), trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), p.108.
- 18 Kittler, p.106. See also Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception* (London: Verso, 1989)
- 19 N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Infomatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p.209; p.210.
- 20 Hayles, p.208.
- 21 Bruce Sterling, 'The Life and Death of Media', *Sound Unbound: Sampling, Digital Music and Culture*, ed. Paul D. Miller (Cambridge MA: MIT Press), pp.73-82.
- 22 'Hearing is Believing: Actual EVP Sessions'; 'Making Contact: EVP Experts'; 'Recording the Life After at Home'. *White Noise* dvd release, Entertainment in Video, 2005.
- 23 The American Association of Electronic Voice Phenomena (AA-EVP) became ATransC, Association Transcommunication in 2010: <http://atransc.org/>, accessed 13/1/2012.
- 24 Raudive, *Breakthrough*, p.108.
- 25 Kelley, p. 25; p.29.
- 26 William S. Burroughs, 'It Belongs to the Cucumbers', *The Adding Machine: Collected Essays* (London: John Calder, 1985, pp.53-60 (p.58). A similar conception of 'imprinting' can be found in Nigel Kneale's television play *The Stone Tape* (BBC, 1972).
- 27 Kelley, p.37.
- 28 Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2001), p.29.

29 Iain Sinclair and Chris Petit (dirs.), *London Orbital* (2002); David Toop, *Ocean of Sound: Aether Talk, Ambient Sound and Imaginary Worlds* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1995), p.270.

30 Sconce, p.91.

31 Don Paterson, 'Afterword' to *Orpheus: A Version of Rilke* (London: Faber, 2006), pp.61-72 (p.63).

32 Brian Jarvis, 'Anamorphic allegory in *The Ring*, or, seven ways of looking at a horror video', *The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies* 3, November 2007. <http://irishgothic horrorjournal.homestead.com/ring.html>, accessed 1 July 2009.

33 Terry Castle, *The Female Thermometer: Eighteenth-Century Culture and the Invention of the Uncanny* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p.147.

34 Here we find a connection to narratives of uncanny wireless, such as Kipling's 'Wireless' , Friedlander's 'Goethe speaks into the phonograph' (reproduced in Kittler) and the film *Frequency*.

35 Sconce, *Haunted Media*, p.49.

36 Jayne Steel, who collaborated with the director of Juliet McKeon on the script of *Frozen*, has confirmed to me that narrative elements of the film are explicitly drawn from the Orpheus myth.

37 Bernard Stiegler, 'The Discrete Image', *Echographies of Television*, p.149.