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Emergency Alert systems and affective historical sound in analog horror

By Dylan Henty

Hi everyone, my name is Dylan Henty and I'm a final year PhD student here at YSJ, and also a member of the Hauntology and Spectrality research group. My research is on the history of VHS horror, from its emergence as a popular medium, in around 1976-1980, up until the modern day, and specifically the major part of my work is on the internet horror subgenre of analog horror, and why, in modern horror culture from approximately 2015 to the modern day, this subgenre has rebirthed the defunct medium of the VHS as a modern horror icon.

This puts my work firmly in the remit of 'Hauntology'. However, one of the most informative and interesting parts of my work has been dealing with Fisher's more popular interpretation of this theory, which originally comes from Jacques Derrida's book *Writing and Difference* (2001), and specifically my wrestling with what are the limitations, contradictions of Fisher's Hauntology, with the very subgenre, analog horror, which I'm discussing- as well, of course, as this modern subgenre being deeply intertwined and expressive of the nostalgic trends Hauntology rests on: a neat paradox. So today, rather than just running through my PhD research, I'm going to highlight an interesting problematic I've found with my own work in relation to fitting analog horror and VHS horror into the framework of Mark Fisher's interpretation of hauntology- specifically, the distinction in horror of what exactly makes something frightening, and in the case of hauntological texts, how much of this is the weight of history. This paper is called 'Emergency Alert systems and affective historical sound in analog horror'.

1. Hauntology and the personal in theory

Fisher's Hauntology theory refuses to give in to the easy, accommodating move of trying to separate out the personal from the objective in his cultural theory. Quite the opposite in fact- in his 2013 book *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Hauntology and Depression,* he makes central his own personal relationships with the cultural texts he is analysing, and places them in a larger context of his own struggles with mental health, and his aesthetic judgements on the change of society and its cultural products from the formative years of his youth.

This perhaps brings a level of honesty to the judgements that form his cultural philosophy, while also highlighting more obviously that much of the work, as well as being deeply insightful, is entirely coloured, thematically and tonally, by his personal struggles and opinions. This gives us pause potentially in applying them widely to the texts our modern culture creates. Even the title itself, pairs his Hauntology theory to his depression, forming the two polarities of the ideas within. Whilst Fisher does not directly address this, it is an obvious connection from the start of the text, and certainly allows for easier recognition of moments, such as in my own research, where his opinions collide with realities.

Fisher makes, at the heart of his work, a powerful, perhaps sweeping judgement. As he wrote in 2013:

> 21st century culture is marked by… anachronism and inertia… but this stasis has been buried, interred behind a superficial frenzy of 'newness', of perpetual movement. The 'jumbling up of time', the montaging of earlier eras, has ceased to be worthy of comment; it is now so prevalent that it is no longer noticed… the 21st century is oppressed by a crushing sense of finitude and exhaustion. It doesn't feel like the future. Or, alternatively, it doesn't feel like the 21st century has started yet (pp.17-18)

Fisher specifically places the end of culture, and the beginning of recycling, postmodern culture, at the end of the 1970s, describing that decade as having 'a particular fascination' to our modern times.

This discussion of the intersection between history, cultural theory and the personal, brings us to the cultural presence, and affective, historical power, of the emergency alert system, and specifically its abundant use as a bodily affecting source of horror, in analog horror.

Firstly, then, an introduction briefly to analog horror.

2. Analog horror

Internet Horror has existed for as long as the internet has existed, and while this is a still burgeoning area of academic research, there are countless archives, fan essays and projects documenting the roots of internet horror back to Internet 1.0 in the early to mid-1990s.

Analog horror, is an intersective subgenre of modern internet horror, VHS horror, and the epistolary horror tradition, the latter of which is present from the earliest gothic novels, such as Horace Walpole's *Caste of Otranto* from 1764; continuing through into the popular modern found footage horror subgenre. Analog horror texts use technology and aesthetics primarily from the 1980s, 90s, and very early 2000s to create horror stories drenched in history and uncomfortable nostalgia; most iconically the subgenre uses the VHS tape as a kind of grand signifier for its dated aesthetics.

The subgenre began 'officially' in a sense, in 2015, when internet comic artist and horror author Kris Straub began YouTube series 'Local 58 TV', the fourth episode of which, 'Station ID', November 2nd, 2017, uses the phrase 'analog horror' for the first time. Taking key influence from pre-existing internet horror trends, especially the affective use of 'glitch aesthetics', i.e. using markers of digital technological failure to create horror intensity in its viewers on a visceral, somatic (bodily) level, as Daniel's examines in great detail in his excellent 2021, *Affective Intensities in Evolving Horror Forms*; analog horror uses the aesthetics of technological failure to tell its highly technophobic and cryptic, fragmented horror stories, albeit dating these techno-horror aesthetics to defunct, 20th century, analogue technologies, and creating horror experiences firmly colliding the past and the present.

Analog horror stories take place mostly on YouTube, in series of short, abstractly interconnected videos, ranging anything from 30 seconds to two hours in length, and centre generally around tales of destruction and decimation of the earth by cosmic horror, analog technology infused forces, and the mutations of the individual into and by techno-analog-organic lifeforms. The constant, impending, world ending threats of analog horror explain its frequent use of the

emergency alert system, ranging from the emergency television broadcast, to the ear splitting air raid siren- and of course, always given to us through a thick malaise of VHS fuzz and distortion, rendering them historically and technologically monstrous.

Local58TV powerfully uses the emergency alert system to signal the end of the world in its Episode 'Skywatching' (1 November, 2019) via a huge, technologically affective entity- which cryptically either lives in the moon, or perhaps *is* the moon- and a wide array of other, by now firmly iconic analog horror series do similar, pairing the somatic, affective presence of emergency alert systems with their cosmic horror, analog monstrosities: this is indicative of the subgenres general use of affective and glitch horror techniques as a foundation of it's texts.

Emergency alert systems are loud, frightening, and in the analog tinted media lexicon of analog horror, are evidently presented as dated, technological relics from another time, as although emergency alert systems still exist, analog horror iconically chooses mid to late 20th century technology for its horror aesthetics.

3. The Emergency Alert System

Systems like the air raid siren, and the later emergency alert system, so often used in analog horror to create horror affect, are literally designed to be affective, i.e. to shock your body into action on a physiological level. This system of bodily shock through technological-media design, is the same exploit of our nervous systems on a pre-conscious level, which Daniel observes in the glitch aesthetics of internet horror.

Recalling this, and comparing it to the repeated use of the emergency alert system in analog horror, it posed an interesting question which is related to the personal biases of Hauntology theory. Namely, in scenes in analog horror where emergency alert systems are used to create fear in the audience, as the diegetic world ends, which again we gain only glimpses of through heavy VHS grain and fuzz effects: how much of this horror affect is actually based in the feeling of historicity which Fisher states drives our blinding, nostalgic obsession with 20th century aesthetics? And, significantly, what do we make of the fact that analog horror, one of the most popular, online horror subgenres of the last 15 years, references, is 'haunted' by, the decades of the 1980s and 1990s, *after* Fisher states culture essentially ended.

Is it true, in short, that use of history is the primary fear and engagement driving factor in Hauntological texts? And even if the dated, defunct aesthetics do contribute in a major way, is this, in the way of Fisher's Hauntological theory, due to the overbearing presence of a 'different, imagined future born from an alternate historical path 'not taken' (p.23), as he repeatedly states is at the root of Hauntological cultural artefacts. Could it simply be that aesthetic use of analogue technology contains a constant, inherent reminder of the possibility of technological failure, more so than slickly designed modern internet era mediums?

Is it simply horrifying to see any technological device about to 'meltdown', in our era when, as Marshal McLuhan predicted, these devices increasingly are extensions of our nervous systems.

There is a question raised by Theodore Adorno, which approaches this issue between the affective stylings of analog horror and Hauntology.

> objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder, that they come to contradict the traditional norm of adequacy. Contradiction… indicates the untruth of

> identity, the fact that the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived (2004 edition of *Negative Dialectics*, p.5)

In essence, researching analog horror's use of the VHS format, the startling sounds of the emergency alert system, and what hauntology does in general, in Fisher's discussion of it and otherwise, is attempt to find and explain that phantom 'trace' when all the objects of our cultural past are placed in the consuming context of history. This trace itself is the ghost attached to each object, and here you can see how this small aspect of contradiction, which Adorno says is inherent in the process of attributing identity- i.e. thought, a category, a socio-cultural place- to anything, adds a problematic to it, a paradox which, in a sense, haunts us.

In this way, the use of world ending events, signalled by bass boosted, or shrill ear piercing emergency alert systems, channelled always through dated aesthetics which are so fundamental to analog horror, could precisely be rooted in somatic response, or existential fears around modern technology failing us, or even around psychological fears of oncoming, future technologies such as AI, filtered through an anxiety-reducing screening metaphor of the past: something which Derrida in his *Spectres of Marx* (1993) calls 'the visor effect' (p.34). Considering this, it is perhaps not that modern culture is stuck in the past due to their being 'no present', in Fisher's sense, but that it returns to the past, out of anxiety over the swiftly oncoming, and deeply unsure, but very present, weight of the future.

It is plainly no coincidence that the more we have become dependent on modern technology, the more we have created horror texts centred on fearful *past* technology. As McLuhan stated again in his 1964 *Understanding Media*, when it comes to technological mediums, dependency on them has created 'the age of anxiety' (p.5).

Conclusion

In conclusion, Fisher attributes an 'end date' or 'death date" of culture to his 'home' decade of the 1970s, stating that everything following is simply an empty, meta-repetition of the lost potential of this period, a mourning which still haunted British society into the 2010s, and up until 2017 and Fisher's death. Of course, it cannot be considered a coincidence that the majority of cultures producers and consumers during this period, had their own formative cultural years, or the time just preceding them, as the 1970s.

In the years during and after Fisher was observing hauntology, the League of Gentlemen (and popular follow on content from the troupes creators) created distinctly 70s influenced horror comedy; conservative austerity perhaps brought back into mind the harshness of Thatcherite trickledown economics; and the long overdue ousting of notorious paedophile Jimmy Saville, as part of operation Yew Tree, must have made it feel to the generation who were the major cultural deciding actors of the 2000s and 2010s, that the 1970s was crashing back into the present like a traumatic repressed memory. In this sense it is possible that Fisher is only highlights one generations Hauntology, and assuming it is the *only* Hauntology due to personal bias. As Derrida says in his original discussion of hauntology- culture is *always* haunted by its pasts. Every decade, essentially, is haunted by the ones before it. This could be taken a step further, to say that what Fisher is describing is really, simply, the Gothic tradition at work, well preceding Derrida's ideas. As Catharine Spooner states, 'undead revenants, ancient curses, outmoded belief systems, hauntings, trauma— all are central to Gothic narrative… perversely, what comes back- what returns- is determined by the concerns of the present' (Spooner, 2014, p.184).

It is often remarked, how much of the audience of analog horror, consuming hauntological media with 1980s and 1990s stylings and aesthetics, have likely never seen a VHS tape, being that it is largely consumed by internet native generations. However, they consume horror, based on defunct technologies, not from the 1970s, but from the decades following, as that is the cultural time period rife for haunting repetition to them, the years of their youth, and just slightly before. In an even less historical sense, however, when a viewer is watching a VHS styled analog horror series, where through flickering and consuming tracking errors and sound distortion, the world is about to be consumed by a giant living planet called 'the iris', and emergency alert broadcasts are interlaced with an informational video about the solar system playing relaxing, elevator style muzak (which does in fact happen in Remy Abode's series *Gemini Home Entertainment,* 2019-present*)*: this horror is historically tinted, undoubtedly, but it is also enough of a somatic, sensory and narrative overload to horrify someone who has no interest or feelings for the early 1990s era when the video is set. Here, in fact, modern anxieties about world destruction and potential unreliability of technology, seem more at the forefront, perhaps even secondary themselves to the experience of watching a harshly created, confusing piece of horror media online, than an act of mourning over a lost past, as Fisher described.

I am studying analog and VHS horror, based around 80s and 90s hauntological aesthetics, but in online spaces the social media based 'Weirdcore' aesthetic movement has even started creating uncanny, liminal horror texts based on early 2010s culture and aesthetics, barely a decade gone by. What we can glean from this, is that Hauntology is unstoppable in its constant appropriation of new eras.

Analog horror perhaps demonstrates how, as Derrida originally stated, hauntology is, ironically, timeless. Maybe that is because to be haunted by something is inherently personal. Maybe each person carries around their own ghostly traces of past culture, both from what they have experienced, and what they haven't. This perhaps leaves the bigger question, of how different hauntology really is, from the fundamental human psychological practices, of nostalgia, and golden age syndrome.

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