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Article

The Material Sound of Magnetic Tape: Digital Horrors and Analogue Technology in *The Black Tapes* and *The Magnus Archives*

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Abstract

There is a strong connection identified between Gothic and hauntological preconceptions with the past returning to disturb the present, and the presence of analogue technology returning to haunt digital horror narratives. It is through analogue nostalgia, especially its interest in the noise inherent to the materiality of analogue technology, that the Gothic preconception with the past is translated into the horror podcast format; the ‘rediscovered manuscript’ becomes the re-mediated cassette tape. This paper will therefore interrogate how hauntology, analogue horror, and nostalgia interact with the Gothic, utilising a comparative methodology between two digital podcast dramas—*The Black Tapes* (2015–2017) and *The Magnus Archives* (2016–2021)—which locate the source of their horror in the materiality, spectrality, and agency of analogue technology in different ways.

Keywords: podcast horror; analogue horror; analogue nostalgia; *The Magnus Archives*; *The Black Tapes*; hauntology

1. Introduction

This paper will explore and compare the active haunting presence of analogue recording technology—specifically cassette and video tapes—within the digital media format of two contemporary horror podcasts: *The Black Tapes* (2015–2017) and *The Magnus Archives* (2016–2021). Both podcasts follow a narrative predicated on the remediation of analogue media made digital, centred on tapes that record paranormal events and which are themselves haunted by much older sound. Yet despite their similar premise, both podcasts explore differently how analogue technology manifests as an active hauntological agent, demonstrating the versatility of haunted analogue technology as a narrative device. A recent article by Marco Malvestio highlights the connection between technology and the Gothic in contemporary horror podcasts, namely regarding the importance of sound for affective horror and the theme of ‘a return of the analogue’ (Malvestio 2025, p. 66). Of particular interest to this paper is Malvestio’s argument that ‘found footage’—a trope common to both analogue and digital horror—is a modern return to the classic Gothic trope of ‘the rediscovered manuscript’, representing the dangers of mediation and knowledge (Malvestio 2025, p. 73). This paper enters the dialogue to discuss further the active role of analogue technology in digital horror podcasts. By reading tape not only as a nostalgic aesthetic but as a material agent that structures audiopositioning, remediation, and narrative causality, this article reframes analogue horror in podcasts as a form of Gothic unearthing rather than mere retro stylisation.



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2. Podcast Horror

The Black Tapes and *The Magnus Archives* are both digitally transmitted horror narratives centred around analogue technology, but the genre in which they operate is neither entirely digital nor analogue horror. Podcast horror initially appears closer related to radio drama and, even further back, oral ghost stories, at least formally, but podcasts deliberately utilise their medium in such a way that differentiates them as something new and individual as opposed to simply a digitised portable radio drama or oral narrative. Danielle Hancock and Leslie McMurtry note of the relationship between the horror genre and the podcast medium that horror podcasting “is one of the fastest-developing horror forms, representing a dramatic shift from a supposedly visually dominated culture and entertainment industry and opening up new potentials and meanings of Gothic and horror fiction” (Hancock and McMurtry 2017, p. 2).

Just as podcasts are significant to the horror genre, so too is the horror genre significant to the podcast medium, and Hancock and McMurtry also note that “Podcast horror has existed almost as long as the podcast itself” (Hancock and McMurtry 2017, p. 2). Indeed, there are a vast number of excellent and successful horror podcasts released within the last decade, such as *Welcome to Night Vale*, *The Lovecraft Investigations*, *Malevolent*, *Old Gods of Appalachia*, *Archive 81*, *The Silt Verses*, to name but a few. This paper focuses on two podcasts: *The Black Tapes* (2015–2017) and *The Magnus Archives* (2016–2021), with a particular focus on the opening episodes due to their centring of analogue technology as the source and agent of their horror. The theme of analogue technology has already been discussed at length with regard to the *Archive 81* podcast (Malvestio 2025; Álvarez Trigo 2024; Hancock and McMurtry 2017), and so this paper will expand this research into *The Black Tapes* and *The Magnus Archives* with a comparative focus to explore how similar concepts of tape-as-a-material-agent-of-horror can manifest in different ways to different effect. By comparing these two podcasts, which have not been discussed explicitly in tandem before, but which both share an explicit conjunction between paranormal research and analogue recording technology, this paper will offer a new perspective on analogue-as-active-agent in horror podcasts.

The Black Tapes follows radio-host-turned-podcaster Alex Reagan as she investigates Dr Richard Strand, the “enigmatic founder” of the Strand Institute, which is a research facility dedicated to investigating and disproving paranormal phenomena, and offers a million-dollar reward to anyone who can offer irrefutable evidence of the paranormal. The evidence relating to the ‘solved’ cases is stored within hundreds of white VHS cases. The unsolved cases, hidden in Strand’s office, are stored in the eponymous ‘black tape’ cases.

The Magnus Archives follows Jonathan Sims, head Archivist of the Magnus Institute—a research institute dedicated to research into the paranormal—as he is digitising the ‘statements’ given by people who have witnessed or experienced paranormal phenomena for the institute to investigate. When the investigation can go no further or reaches a dead end, the statement passes into the archives.

The shared interest in these podcasts here is in analogue technology as a means through which to investigate, discuss, and most importantly, transmit the paranormal and supernatural. Both podcasts deal with paranormal research institutes and unsolved cases, the evidence of which is stored on (or in) analogue tape and then re-mediated into digital through the form of the podcast. Both podcasts begin in the format of a horror anthology, with each statement or unsolved case seemingly unrelated, until, after a series of repeated names and references back, it becomes clear that the cases are far more linked than first appears, and the protagonists are drawn into an overarching plot about horrors emerging from the stories on the tapes, and indeed from the tapes themselves, to bring about the end of the world as we know it.

The two podcasts are therefore similar in their narrative structure and their central premise, but the method and justification in which the narrative is shared with the audience is approached very differently. Each podcast has a different diegetic justification or conceit as to why the story is being recorded to audio, which is made explicit within the narrative. The audio of *The Black Tapes* is presented as a recorded podcast that Alex Reagan is making for her network, Pacific Northwest Stories, which anticipates and directly references an intentional listening audience. The narrative and sound design draws explicit attention to the podcast format, including regular reminders from Reagan that “you are listening to the Black Tapes podcast”, meta-discussions regarding the direction of the podcast with the producer, and a title music sequence that includes curated ‘retakes’ of the audio recording process:

“Now we’re recording. Cool. And I’m gonna do the intro part as well? Yeah. My emphasis, I think, was just a little bit too much, like. . . Dun-dun! I don’t know. Let me just do it again. Great. I’m doing it again! (chuckles)”. (*The Black Tapes* 2015–2017, all episodes)

Hancock and McMurtry discuss further how this opening sequence emulates the hugely popular non-fiction investigative journalism podcast *Serial* and explore how post-*Serial* narrative podcasts such as *The Black Tapes* applied *Serial*’s structures to develop a new unified podcast media identity as distinct from that of other audio media such as radio (Hancock and McMurtry 2018, pp. 84–86). By reproducing the recognisable format of a well-known non-fiction podcast, *The Black Tapes* aligns itself further with the podcast identity and with non-fiction as opposed to fiction. The podcast, therefore, exists diegetically in the fictional storyworld but also positions itself as existing extradiegetically within the reality of the listener’s world and further establishes the podcast format as integral to the storytelling. Conversely, in *The Magnus Archives*, the audio is described as having been recorded onto the Archivist’s tape player. Some of this is intentional, such as the archived statements being preserved in audio form, and, later, the Archivist recording his own investigations into his colleagues and into the tunnels beneath the institute. Some of it, however, is unintentional, with the tape player beginning to turn on of its own accord, which develops into the tape players multiplying and manifesting from nowhere to record private conversations between characters.

There is a difference of intentionality and awareness of audience—much of the audio recorded onto the tapes in *The Magnus Archives* was not intended for an audience by those whose voices are heard, whereas the audio of *The Black Tapes* only exists because there is an audience to hear it. Nevertheless, in both cases, the narratives are not crafted as a written story that happens to be read aloud; the narrative is specifically crafted for an audio medium in a relationship that would not work in a written or visual format. In both podcasts, therefore, analogue tape is a way into the narrative for the listener, but this is enacted in different ways. In *The Black Tapes*, the expectant listening audience of Pacific Northwest Stories is the reason the ‘black tapes’ are being investigated, whereas in *The Magnus Archives*, the tapes are the means by which the listening audience accesses the investigation. Analogue tape is therefore able to function as both subject and object within the horror narrative.

Where, then, is the listener? If the audio recordings exist within the diegesis of the fictional podcast world, then the audience does as well. Euritt and McMurtry discuss the importance of ‘audiopositioning’ in podcasting—the spatial imagination of where the audience’s ears are in relation to the events they are hearing—and how it both contributes to and implicates the audience in the horror (Euritt and McMurtry 2021, p. 4). In the case of *The Black Tapes*, which is a fictional podcast masquerading as a real-life investigative podcast, the audience is in the same position as the podcast’s listeners within the fictional

world. This increases the audience's investment and entanglement with the world of the narrative, as Alvarez Trigo argues that the common podcast trope of a journalist protagonist "contributes to the direct involvement of listeners, allowing them to project themselves into the storyworld and accordingly feeling as if they were listening to the radio program directly, learning about events as they unfold", and also serves to bring the fictional narrative into the listener's extradiegetic reality (Álvarez Trigo 2024, p. 194). The intimacy and portability of the podcast format, broadcasting directly into the audience's ears wherever they go, allows the fictional world of the podcast to blend with the real, and, according to Euritt and McMurtry, this sense of "liminality" between the fictional sound and real space can affect the audience's experience of the environment around them and add a further sensory dimension to the horror (Euritt and McMurtry 2021, pp. 3, 5). The sense of liminality and immersion is heightened by the lack of specific spatial positioning of the listener's ears; they are not listening from any one location, therefore can be listening from any location. The audience's ears are in the microphones at the studio, inside the recorder on Alex Reagan's phone, just as they are listening from their homes or commutes or headphones. The world of the podcast exists simultaneously in the fictional world and the real world, with the audience's ears positioned in both. This, in turn, implicates the audience in the narrative causality—the eponymous black tapes are being opened specifically because there is a listening audience waiting to hear about them. Alex Reagan's investigations do not exist independently of the in-world podcast, and the investigation continues because of the interest of the podcast listeners, both the fictional listeners referenced within the narrative and the extradiegetic audience of the podcast in the real world, who are blurred into one audience due to their positioning. Furthermore, certain narrative events are catalysed by members of the audience, such as the kidnapping of Sebastien Torres by a cultist who learned about him by listening to the podcast, and so the entangled real-fictional audience is further implicated in the narrative causality.

Meanwhile, in *The Magnus Archives*, while there is a diegetic reason for the audio being recorded—digitising the statements—there is no clear explanation as to how the audience is able to hear this. Within the fictional world of the narrative, there is an assumption among the characters that the tape players are the manifestation of an eldritch entity known as 'The Eye' or 'Beholding', which represents the fear of being watched and surveillance. The tapes are the means through which this entity is able to observe the characters and feed on their fear, as well as representing its presence. The analogue technology therefore becomes both a symbol and an agent of the horror. The audience, too, are implicated in this; spatially, the audience's ears are *inside* the tape player, hearing only what it hears. This is supported by the sound design, with voices sounding muffled when the tape player is hidden in a bag, or distant as characters walk towards or away from it. This positions the audience in the role of the horror itself, as opposed to its subject, as both audience and horror access the narrative through the medium of the tapes. This is later complicated by a revelation towards the end of the series that the tapes have been placed deliberately by a separate entity known as 'The Web', which represents the fear of manipulation. The audience is therefore positioned in opposition to the protagonists—they are complicit in the entities' manipulation of the events that the protagonists are trying to prevent, and the audience's entertainment derived from the protagonists' fear parallels the eldritch entities feeding off that very same fear.

In both cases, therefore, though executed differently, the audiopositioning of the podcasts implicates the listener in the narrative causality. This is directly related to the analogue technology at the centre of each podcast: in *The Black Tapes*, the listening audience is the reason for the investigation and the reason the tape cases are opened and continue to be opened; in *The Magnus Archives*, the audience is inside the tape players, and identified

with the eldritch beings that control them. This therefore elevates or develops the analogue technology from an aesthetic device or symbol of retro nostalgia to an active agent within the podcasts.

3. Analogue Nostalgia and Analogue Horror

While not technically ‘analogue horror’ in terms of genre or form, the analogue technology is integral to the horror in both podcasts in a manner that develops on themes of analogue horror and analogue nostalgia. Dominik Schrey discusses analogue nostalgia as a phenomenon predicated on a very loose distinction or binary between ideas of analogue and digital, which may not directly map onto the way those terms are used in any technical sense (Schrey 2024, p. 481). In its most simplistic dichotomy, digital is new, and analogue is old—specifically obsolete. There is a perception of authenticity, with analogue media being perceived as capturing the truth or the soul of a sound, complete with its imperfections—tape crackle, record scratch—whereas digital is clean and therefore sterile and soulless; Schrey argues that the prime moment for this was the advent of the CD, and writes:

“Supposedly freed from the background noise and the signs of wear and tear of records and tapes, the CD—or rather the marketing of the electronics companies—promised a sound that lacked any signifiers of mediation. However, this claim of a revolutionary rupture from previous sound media also opened up possibilities for oppositional readings. The positively connoted “purity” of the sound could be reinterpreted without much effort as a negatively connoted “sterility” or “coldness”. Frequently, this “CD anxiety” (Plasketes 1992) and criticism of the technical specifications of Digital Audio were combined with a diffuse metaphysics of authenticity. According to Jonathan Sterne (2006, 2016), this, together with the notion that analogue media are somehow closer to nature, forms the basis of analogue nostalgia”. (Schrey 2024, p. 485)

What is of most importance to this argument here is this emphasis on materiality—the “signifiers of mediation” and what Schrey describes elsewhere as a “longing for analogue physicality” (Schrey 2014, p. 34). This longing for the physicality of analogue media leads to its material sounds being recreated artificially in digital media: the clicks and scratches of non-existent vinyl and tape inserted into digital audio, which can be heard in both podcasts. This relates to a more specific original definition of ‘analogue nostalgia’, which, Schrey argues, “is not about the refusal of digital technologies, but exclusively about the digital remediation of analogue aesthetics within the digital” (Schrey 2014, p. 34). Analogue nostalgia occurs here specifically within the context of remediation of the analogue into the digital. This, in turn, mirrors the plot devices of the podcasts—both centre on analogue media that are remediated into the digital podcast format specifically in an audio context, where the literal ‘noises’ and sounds, as well as figurative noises in the form of content, of the analogue are replicated and recreated in the digital.

There are a number of connections between sound, in particular music, and the concept of hauntology: a compulsion to return to the recording techniques of the past and the failure of the future in the sterility and impotence of modern new recording technology that lacks the ‘soul’ of analogue. In *Ghosts of My Life*, Mark Fisher describes an album of hauntological modern music that “conjures audio-spectres out of crackle, foregrounding rather than repressing sound’s accidental materialities” (Fisher 2014, p. 128). The nostalgic recreation of analogue materiality that has no material existence, existing only digitally, becomes a manifestation of a spectre within the audio. Yet this noise of materiality, the extraneous crackle, is the very means by which the spectre is able to appear. This becomes very literal in the context of the two horror podcasts, where the audio spectres are supernatural entities,

as well as an artificial echo of dead recording technology. The remediation in digital podcast of the material sounds of analogue tape within *The Black Tapes* and *The Magnus Archives* emphasises the tapes as physical objects with agency as opposed to aesthetic imagery or foci of a melancholic nostalgia.

Where does nostalgia become horror? Cooley and Milligan, in their discussion of creepypasta—a written and visual internet horror form that is not too far divorced from analogue horror—argue that “‘all nostalgia is horrific’, in the way it embalms past experience (often from childhood) into an unwitting memento mori, a reminder of death brought on by ever-fading memories and unheeded by our idealized remembrances” (Cooley and Milligan 2018, p. 196). In terms of analogue horror and nostalgia, analogue horror takes this remediation of the spectral-materiality of analogue technology, often from childhood, into the digital and interprets it into a malevolent presence, turning the hauntological into an active haunting. By their reliance on analogue technology, both *The Black Tapes* and *The Magnus Archives* are unable to exist fully in the present, haunted by constant reminders of death in the form of the long-gone preserved in audio. This is particularly prevalent in *The Magnus Archives*, in which the voice of the dead former Archivist, Gertrude Robinson, constantly resurfaces in the tapes, her ghost preserved in especially crackly audio, and a ‘found footage’ recording of her final moments is played aloud and re-recorded by the new Archivist as a kind of spectral re-enactment, turning Gertrude into a re-mediated analogue horror in her own right.

Jordan Maison, writing for Videomaker magazine in 2023, describes analogue horror as a subgenre of horror—specifically ‘found footage’ horror—which has gained popularity recently as an internet phenomenon:

“Analog [sic] horror derives its name from the overall style associated with it. It uses visual aesthetics from the “analog” days of media creation, anchored to the time period spanning the 1960s and 1990s. This includes everything from low-fidelity graphics, recreating static from antenna interference or even picture distortions made to look like you’re watching a battered, old VHS tape”. (Maison 2023, p. 44)

Again, the focus here is on the materiality of the medium: “a battered, old VHS tape” whose antiquity and material existence is emphasised by its “battered, old” appearance, which then manifests audibly and visually in the imperfections of that which is recorded on it in static and interference. Both analogue nostalgia and analogue horror have a fascination with the extraneous noise of analogue recording—a spectral presence of *something else* that is not the sound that the recording was intending to capture. Within the contexts of our two podcasts, the spectral presences of interference and extraneous noise again take on a literal and paranormal angle, as the materiality of tape allows it to capture something more supernatural.

It is worthwhile to briefly mention digital horror. Although the podcasts of interest to this paper are both digital media items within the genre of horror, they are distinct from the specific genre of ‘digital horror’. Digital horror is not dissimilar to analogue horror—indeed, following on from Schrey’s assessment that the categories of ‘digital’ and ‘analogue’ are relatively fluid and can blur with each other, both digital and analogue horror share some of the same concepts, though express them a little differently aesthetically. Like analogue horror, digital horror is also focused on the spectres that haunt information technology, though perhaps without the “antiquity” or “obsolescence” or hauntological return to the technology of one’s childhood that analogue horror manipulates. Digital horror often deals with contemporary technology, most famously in the hand-held camera ‘found footage’ style of the *Blair Witch Project* (1999) and *Paranormal Activity* (2007). Linne Blake and Xavier Aldana Reyes argue that

“Digital Horror ... is a product of the post 9/11 neo-liberal worldview—characterised by security paranoia, constant surveillance and social alienation. Digital Horror screens its subjects via the trans-national technologies of our age, such as the camcorder and CCTV, and records them in secret footage that may, one day, be found”. (Blake and Reyes 2019, blurb)

A common trope within digital horror is ‘found footage’, a theme that developed from digital horror into analogue horror. It represents surveillance, but also a kind of voyeurism—the viewer is implicated or complicit in the horror by taking part in this unwanted or unknowing surveillance. Blake and Aldana Reyes highlight a number of digital horror films that address the boundary where witnessing becomes participation (Blake and Reyes 2019, p. 6). Indeed, Maison suggests that this sense of voyeurism and complicity or involvement is a kind of through link in the genesis from digital to analogue horror, arguing that

“The voyeuristic style inherent in found footage eventually gave birth to analog [sic] horror, which takes the concept even further. In analog horror, viewers aren’t merely witnessing characters dealing with things. They are targets of the horrors and thrills themselves”. (Maison 2023, p. 44)

The observer of the digital horror therefore becomes the subject of the analogue horror. It is this act of participation engendered by the voyeuristic nature of found footage—or, in the cases of these podcasts, found audio—that further implicates the listener in the horror of the narrative. This voyeuristic complicity, in conjunction with the complicity laid on the listener by their audiopositioning as enabler or agent of horror, complicates the listener’s relationship with the horror narrative—they cannot simply sit back and enjoy the characters’ distress; they are directly implicated in it. This extrapolates further on the argument put forward by Hancock and McMurtry that podcasts are “listener-led”; podcast creators are answerable not to network funding and censorship but to a collective and community-driven fanbase, which both echoes the age-old practice of telling stories around a campfire and allows for far greater diversity and experimentation within the podcast medium than any other (Hancock and McMurtry 2017, p. 5). The voyeuristic elements of analogue/digital horror in these two podcasts therefore develop on the idea of podcasts as a “listener-led” medium, as the active role of the podcast listeners and fandoms shape the narratives both extra-diegetically and diegetically. Extra-diegetically, it is the digital and portable format and platforms that enable the involvement of the community, yet within the narrative, it is the analogue tape that is the vessel for the audience and the catalyst of the narrative horror. The podcasts are therefore able to utilise both the liberty provided by the digital and the narrative potential of the analogue.

4. The Centrality of Analogue Tape

In both podcasts, analogue tape figures significantly in the way the podcast is presented to an audience or potential audience, as a central part of the podcast’s identity. The very name of *The Black Tapes* podcast comes from the series of black VHS tapes of unsolved cases that are being investigated. Even before listening begins, it is clear that tape plays a central role. In *The Magnus Archives*, the logo of the podcast is a distorted line drawing of a cassette tape. Hancock and McMurtry have highlighted the importance of paratexts in podcasting: a podcast is not exclusively an audio medium, and the visual material that appears on a listener’s RSS feed or literally on their screen as they are listening is significant (Hancock and McMurtry 2017, p. 4). In the case of *The Magnus Archives*, the image of the tape is there as a constant reminder that what the audience is supposedly listening to is a recording on tape. Analogue technology therefore forms a central part of the identity

of both podcasts—even before listening, it is built into the metadata and the way they advertise themselves.

Both podcasts address the central image of the tape in their first episode. In *The Black Tapes*, Alex Reagan narrates:

“Dr. Strand has a bookcase filled with hundreds of white VHS cases. For our younger listeners, these are hard plastic cases big enough to hold a VHS tape. Roughly 8 inches by 5 inches. . . . Dr. Strand eventually agreed to let me take a look at one of the unsolved, he would say unsolved yet, cases from that mysterious row of plastic black VHS containers that I’m going to refer to as the black tapes from this point forward. And yes, this is how we came up with the name of our podcast”. (*The Black Tapes 2015–2017*, Episode 1: A Tale of Two Tapes Part I)

Immediately, the colour symbolism draws a distinction or dichotomy between the white tape cases, containing the solved paranormal cases, and the black cases, containing the unsolved paranormal cases. Furthermore, the direct reference to the connection with the name of the podcast marks these black tapes immediately upon their introduction as both significant and sinister. The double meaning of ‘case’ links the analogue technology directly to the investigation of the paranormal; each investigative ‘case’ is represented and contained within a VHS ‘case’. Reagan feels it necessary to explain what a VHS case is—the tape is positioned for the audience not as an uncanny experience with something eerily familiar, a nostalgic technology from childhood, but something altogether unfamiliar, perhaps due to a preconception about the average age of a horror podcast listener. However, Schrey notes that many theorists of analogue nostalgia have argued that

“analogue nostalgia is a nostalgia that refers to reference points beyond the frame of one’s biography. For example, Marks states, ‘analog nostalgia seems especially prevalent among works by students who started learning video production when it was fully digital.’” (Schrey 2024, p. 488)

It is therefore precisely this disconnect and lack of familiarity between the expected audience and the VHS tape that allows the analogue nostalgia to creep in. The nostalgia is not for any specific past time experienced by the listener but for a constructed vision of the analogue past conjured from the spectres of the listener’s imagination.

Interestingly, however, Reagan does not explain what a VHS tape is, just the case. This is partly because the black tape cases do not all contain VHS tapes; in fact, it is not until episode 8 that the evidence inside the case “funnily enough, actually is a black VHS tape” (*The Black Tapes 2015–2017*, Episode 8: Board to Death). The tape cases are therefore both a symbol for antiquated technology and a physical vessel for this technology in many formats. The media inside the tape cases are mixed—some are associated with the aesthetic of antiquity or obsolescence of analogue, such as super 8 footage of a children’s birthday party with a shadowy figure lurking at the edges, while some are more reflective of the tropes of digital horror, with ‘found CCTV footage’ of a woman collapsing after being passed by a mysterious hooded stranger with an upside-down face. Yet even when the media are closer to the digital, they still do not exist only digitally—each unsolved media artefact has a physical presence within its own coffin of a black VHS case. While not necessarily containing tape, the tape cases therefore act as a vessel in which the real horror is contained. Returning to Malvestio’s suggestion, echoed by Blake and Aldana Reyes, that found footage media echoes the Gothic trope of the found or rediscovered manuscript that acts as a means for the past to return and disturb the present (Malvestio 2025, p. 73; Blake and Reyes 2019, p. 6), the VHS cases here act in the stead of the physical document—the paper and ink of the manuscript—and the various media within are the cursed or forbidden knowledge

contained within the words on the page. Once again, it is the materiality and physicality of the tape cases as a representative of analogue technology that is of importance.

Meanwhile, in *The Magnus Archives*, we are told that what we are hearing in our digital podcast is, in fact, a recording on tape. The Archivist explains in the opening of the first episode:

“I plan to digitise the files as much as possible and record audio versions, though some will have to be on tape recorder as my attempts to get them on my laptop have met with... significant audio distortions.” (*The Magnus Archives* 2016–2021, Episode 1: Angler Fish)

This short supplemental note to the first statement hints at a broader hinterland beyond the podcast—there are many more statements in the archive—but the ones presented to the audience have been curated, as they all have something in common: they resisted digitisation onto the laptop, and any interaction with digital technology leads to “significant audio distortions”. The statements on the tape, and therefore in the podcast, have all rejected the digital in favour of the analogue, perhaps because they contain something else that only analogue recording technology can capture. Schrey notes that analogue nostalgia views digital recordings as “merely ‘simulations’ of what they represent, hence missing the ‘essence’, the ‘soul’, the ‘authenticity’ or the ‘aura’ of the actual recorded sound,” the ‘life’ of which is better captured in analogue (Schrey 2014, p. 31). The analogue is therefore better able to capture the ‘life’ or presence of something else beyond sound. Within the narrative, the primary commonality between the statements recorded on tape rather than digitally is that they relate to the real paranormal events and entities of the narrative. The perceived authenticity of analogue technology that captures the real soul of a sound also allows it to capture something supernatural that defies the sterility of the digital, or even to act as a threshold for something paranormal to come through into the characters’ world.

Although this supplemental note from the Archivist is the first direct mention of the tapes in the Magnus Archives, it is not the first appearance. The tape is introduced at the very beginning of the episode with the click of a tape recorder turning on. Every episode begins this way and ends with the click of the tape turning off. The presence of the tapes is not spectral but material—the sound associated with their physicality and the clunky on and off button become a kind of audio stage direction for the presence of the tape. Malvestio notes that “the noise of the tape recorder . . . often signals the transition from one narrative level to another” (Malvestio 2025, p. 73). While this sound begins as a simple framing device that bookends each episode, it develops throughout the series, separating the Archivist’s reading of the statement from the ‘supplemental’ material he records afterwards—detailing investigations into his colleagues or the tunnels below the Institute. The click of the tape player therefore comes to signify the shift in the Archivist’s character, from rational and disinterested observer/recorder to obsessive and paranoid investigator. Eventually, the sound begins to occur in a more spectral sense, completely divorced from any human interaction: the tape players begin appearing and turning on of their own accord. Sometimes this is noticed, much to the dismay and horror of the characters, and sometimes unnoticed, capturing conversations between characters unknowingly, with the voyeuristic eye of surveillance. The material click of the tape player, therefore, also becomes the sound of manifestation.

This phenomenon occurs further in the subsequent series from Jonathan Sims and Rusty Quill, *The Magnus Protocol*, which exists in a digital rather than analogue space, though it still suggests an air of antiquity, with its medium being a ‘retro’ outdated computer software. The sequel advertised itself as completely distinct from the original *Magnus Archives*, set in a different world that did not require any prior knowledge of the *Archives* series to navigate. Nevertheless, this exact same sound effect of a tape recorder turning on

starts occurring within the *Protocol* episodes, and characters notice tape recorders appearing supernaturally out of nowhere, it seems, often as a precursor to a horrible event, the audio of which is devoured by the tape recorder as a proxy for some kind of eldritch entity. Though this sound effect causes unease for the characters, it has greater significance for the listeners of the original *Archives* series, who, unlike the characters, are already familiar with what this sound represents, leading to a heightened sense of tension and fear in the audience from this audible dramatic irony. The sounds associated with the materiality of the tape, specifically the click of it turning on, announce the arrival of horror for those who know. In a hauntological sense, the sequel is haunted by the audio-spectral presence of its own past iteration, which should have remained finished and over, yet it returns to disturb the present of the show that followed it.

Furthermore, the material click of the tape player signifying the manifestation of the monster in *The Magnus Archives* echoes Alvarez Trigo's discussion of the tape player in another tape-centred horror podcast, *Archive 81*, which argues that "[t]his emphasis on media qualities suggests that the locus of horror in the story is located in the medium and the mediated content . . . In the narrative, the act of listening to the tapes functions as a threshold between the monster that inhabits this unknowable other world and reality" (Álvarez Trigo 2024, p. 191). Likewise, Malvestio argues that in both *Archive 81* and *The Magnus Archives*, the horror or supernatural occurrence explicitly comes from the act of recording and re-recording lost media (Malvestio 2025, p. 74). In *The Magnus Archives*, it is the act of remediation—the written statement recorded onto analogue tape and heard on a digital podcast—that acts as a means for the central horror of the show to manifest. In the final episode of Series 4, the recording of a statement onto tape by the Archivist develops into a ritual that allows the Beholding to enter the world of the narrative and remake the world in its own horrifying image.

Tape as a vessel for manifestation is but one way that analogue remediation acts as a material agent of horror. In *The Black Tapes*, the re-mediation is less explicitly about unleashing the monster within the machine and more about an unravelling or unearthing of layers of time. Here we have VHS tape cases from one era of technology, discussed in a digital podcast from another, and containing media from an even older era. In the famous quote from Hamlet, often referenced by both Derrida and Fisher in their writings on hauntology, "the time is out of joint" (Derrida 1993; Fisher 2013). It is the opening of the tape case that 'unearths' this jumble of time represented by various media technologies and allows it to disturb the present.

5. Remediation and Unearthing

Malvestio defines remediation as "the representation of one mass medium in another, and the adoption of some characteristics of the former in the latter" (Malvestio 2025, p. 74), as discussed previously in terms of analogue nostalgia and the remediation of the sounds of analogue materiality re-mediated in digital music. In relation to horror podcasts specifically, Malvestio notes that "The tape recorder . . . stands in opposition to the smartphone or PC on which listeners enjoy them—a physical medium versus the dematerialized media space of contemporaneity" (Malvestio 2025, p. 75). In horror podcasts, therefore, there is a gulf between the analogue technology within the narrative and the digital technology through which the listeners experience it. This gulf is both physical—the materiality of analogue versus the "dematerialized" digital—but also temporal, with a sense of antiquity imposed on the analogue that returns to disturb the present of the digital through the act of remediation.

This sense of temporality is directly connected to materiality in hauntology by Fisher:

“In sonic hauntology, we hear that time is out of joint. The joints are audible in the crackles, the hiss . . . The surface noise of the sample unsettles the illusion of presence in at least two ways: first, temporally, by alerting us to the fact that what we are listening to is a phonographic revenant; and second, ontologically, by introducing the technical frame, the material precondition of the recording, on the level of content. We are suddenly made aware again of what the first listeners to phonograph recordings were acutely conscious: that we are witnessing a captured slice of the past irrupting into the present. The crackle, meanwhile, reminds us of the technological means by which this capturing of time was made possible”. (Fisher 2013, pp. 48–49)

The materiality, the crackle, is the means by which the haunting of digital technology by the analogue technology it remediates is made known and draws attention to the time being out of joint. In *The Black Tapes*, the black tape cases function as coffins from which the “phonographic revenants” of the past can be unburied and released. From the outset, technology has been associated with haunting and spectrality, often in terms of the lack of physicality of the audio and visual presence that wireless technology can manifest, as Jeffrey Sconce argues: “sound and image without material substance, the electronically mediated worlds of telecommunications often evoke the supernatural by creating virtual beings that appear to have no physical form” (Sconce 2005, p. 4). Where the spectrality of wireless transmission intersects with the materiality of seemingly inanimate objects, a sense of the uncanny emerges, and Sconce highlights the uncanny nature of wirelessly transmitted sound, which “appeared decidedly supernatural by imbuing inanimate items with the ‘living’ voice of radio” (Sconce 2005, p. 68). In the *Black Tapes*, it is through the materiality of analogue media that this uncanny spectrality is able to make itself known and make itself manifest, and the layers of disjointed time are able to sit physically together in the form of technological artefacts stored within tape cases. In this sense, the remediation of the analogue is a lot like a Gothic ‘unearthing’, whereby the literal act of digging up a buried physical artefact from the ground, or the symbolic uncovering of the past buried within the soil, releases an ancient horror. This horror is something that ought to have stayed dead, or forgotten, or lost, but the act of unearthing unleashes its power in the present. The media within the black VHS cases, the tapes, the super 8 footage, and CCTV serve as historical artefacts that resurrect their own past with their unearthing. This analogue media is therefore a kind of revenant, as Malvestio further argues: “Analogue media, unlike digital media, are media that age, whose material texture (replicated in podcasts by the characteristic squeak of the tape player) becomes a symbol of a historical depth that refuses to be erased and returns in spectral form” (Malvestio 2025, p. 75).

This idea of ageing is significant, as the ageing of analogue media eventually leads to loss. Fisher (2014) discusses in depth the theme of analogue as media of loss, whereas the digital removes the possibility of loss, as Schrey summarises in his discussion of analogue nostalgia:

“the possibility of experiencing loss itself is lost with digitisation (Fisher 2014, p. 144). For Fisher, the fetishisation of the traces of usage of analogue media is therefore a nostalgic compensation for exactly this paradox: according to him, it is only in the ruined remnants of an all too present historical past, in the canny crackle and hiss of decaying recordings, that the experience of loss is still comprehensible at all”. (Schrey 2024, p. 488)

If ‘unearthing’ is about digging up something that should have stayed buried, then the remediation of analogue technology makes permanent that which should have been lost. In the narratives of both podcasts, the things being ‘unearthed’ and made permanent are the stories of the supernatural—in both cases, these are the remnants of investigations

that were closed or hit a dead end. These stories were filed away, literally buried out of sight in Strand's office and in boxes in his father's house and hidden from the shame of his failure to debunk them, or in the chaos and disorganisation of the Archives, which the audience later learns was a deliberate attempt by former Archivist Gertrude Robinson to thwart the Beholding entity, as opposed to her archival incompetence, as we are initially led to believe. The unearthing of a past technology that ought to have been lost becomes more than a vehicle for nostalgia and a sense of loss but an active return of past revenants that becomes a narrative agent of uncanny haunting in the present and catalyses the plot into action.

Yet this digging up of that-which-should-have-remained-buried also includes the analogue technology itself, as Hancock and McMurtry note: the remediation of analogue into digital "is a preservation and resurrection of "dead" technology. . . . 'Analogue is supposed to be dead, long ago swept into obscurity by digital technologies. But it never did quite die'" (Hancock and McMurtry 2017, p. 3). Returning to the connection with the Gothic, Malvestio compares the remediated tapes to the 'rediscovered manuscript' trope of Gothic literature, representing the 'dangers of mediation and knowledge' (Malvestio 2025, p. 73). There is a kind of legacy of imitation or reimagination at play: the found manuscript becoming the found footage, which becomes the found audio. The connotations of 'antiquity' inherent within the 'manuscript' of the Gothic tradition are reimaged in the notion of analogue media as ancient and obsolete, leaving the time out of joint as the ancient and the modern collide in the form of ancient technology, and the forgotten horrors of the past that it inflicts upon the present.

6. Conclusions

In *The Black Tapes* and *The Magnus Archives*, the analogue tape of the past manifests to disturb the present of the digital podcasts—tape is haunting its own future in terms of audio media technology. But this is not the ancient past; it is comparatively recent, and the speed at which technology develops perhaps imposes a further sense of distance, therefore disjoining perceptions of temporality. The Gothic fascination with antiquity imposes a sense of ancientness on the analogue technology when compared to the digital format of the podcast in which it manifests. Analogue technology exists within the narratives as both nostalgic and unfamiliar, intertwining it with the uncanny and the supernatural, and serves as a vessel for the unearthing of something ancient and terrible through its remediation into digital format. Hancock and McMurtry argue that "[t]he podcast liberates the audio horror experience from its analogue tethers, allowing listeners to alter any space at any time" (Hancock and McMurtry 2017, p. 3). Nevertheless, this liberation is incomplete. The digital may provide greater opportunity and reach for the podcast as an audio storytelling medium, yet it is not fully able to escape the analogue due to its narrative potentiality. In a hauntological failure of the future, despite the disembodied nature of digital sound itself serving as an almost spectral presence, it is in the analogue materiality of the past that haunting resides most effectively and affectively. Horror podcasts are therefore formally steeped in the Gothic due to their inability to escape their own past.

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