

Haunted Landscapes: Place, Past and Presence

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Abstract

This short introductory paper presents some key aspects of hauntological approaches in cultural studies, and explores the varied connections between landscapes, archaeology, folklore, and the spectres of the past. It examines how these spectres can be uncovered in archaeological contexts, tied up with contemporary anxieties, and threaten the future. It further considers how spectres of the past in archaeology and folklore are adapted, commercialised and commodified in mass media and heritage consumption.

Key words

Landscape, legends, hauntology, spectres

Facing the Spectre

We moderns, despite our mechanistic and rationalistic ethos, live in landscapes filled with ghosts.
(M.M. Bell 1997, 813)

The emergence of the ‘spectral turn’ in contemporary cultural theory is often attributed to Jacques Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* (1994). In this, Derrida formulates the portmanteau *hauntology* (haunting + ontology) to refer to the persistence or return of the past in the present, much like a ghost, and the disjunctures in time and being this creates – *time is out of joint*. The past in this sense can present an ontological threat to the present and to the future, and thus represents both the ‘no longer’ and the ‘not yet’. This persistence means we are sometimes confronted by a past that we find difficult to face (Shaw 2018, 19), and thus the hauntological is a useful frame within which to understand dark and difficult heritages, and of the strangeness that is encountered in something that should be familiar – such as local landscapes.

Whilst most introductory discussions of hauntology begin with, or at least feature, Derrida, his consideration of the return, uncovering, or conjuring of spectres of the past in the present in fact sits in a long (hauntological) line of various critical perspectives on unsettling, haunting affects on human (un)consciousness (see del Pilar Blanco and Peeren 2013, 2-10). Most famous of these spectres is Sigmund Freud’s treatise *Das Unheimliche*, first published in 1919 and (somewhat inadequately) translated as *The Uncanny* – something in the familiar that is frightening, and something that should remain hidden that is exposed (see Freud 2003). Both archaeological and folkloric themes feature in Freud’s analysis, and the uncanny, of course, has found its way as an analytical tool in archaeology and folkloristics. Within archaeology, for example, the uncanny can be seen to lie in the archaeological act of excavation, which reveals that which should be hidden, and this is part of the appeal (and aversion) of the archaeological process to the public (Moshenska 2006). ‘Beyond the unheimlich’ (Fisher 2016), however, hauntology has provided a frame within which we can negotiate and understand the archaeological imagination (Shanks 2012), and consider how the deep-time of archaeological materials produce ‘enchantments’ that can play a role in broader social, cultural and environmental challenges (Fredengren 2016). Hauntings can expand our perspectives on the significance of the recent past, and archaeological landscapes in general, by considering how archaeological remains can be viewed as more than simply sources of information about the past (Herva 2014, 299), particularly with such seemingly concrete yet highly emotive phenomena such as war and its remains.

Arguably one of the most influential contemporary writers on the subject of haunting within social and cultural analysis is Avery F. Gordon, in particular her *Ghostly Matters* (2008). For Gordon, haunting is

a form of ‘social configuration’ (Gordon 2008, 20) and a route to problematizing knowledge production – in accessing and giving voice to the ‘marginalized, trivialized, denied, disqualified, taxed and aggrieved *and* a matter of redistributing respect, authority’ (Gordon 2008, xviii, original emphasis). This concern with knowledge production and challenging systems of power is highly relevant within contemporary critical heritage studies (e.g. Harrison 2013, Harrison et al 2020), and feeds into the recognition and significance of the ‘historical consciousness’ of a given society, and to multivocality – particularly in the integration of folk narratives and archaeology (e.g. Paphitis 2020; see Gunnell 2008, Siikala 2008, Gunnell 2009).

Hauntings occur across real or imagined landscapes, seascapes, spacescapes and netscapes. Liminality is often, but not exclusively, a feature – after all, the urban and industrial are just as susceptible to hauntings (e.g. K. Bell 2019, although see Young, this volume), but where places might not be marginal, spectres are. As Matila (this volume) illustrates, archives themselves are filled with ghosts that are often neglected or suppressed. Whilst ghosts are prime examples of the presence of the past in the present (Simpson 2008, Traa, this volume), places are not only haunted by ‘conventional’ ghosts, other revenants or non-human, supernatural beings; hauntings are also personal memories, collective histories, or physical remains. Indeed, all ghosts are intrinsically *of* the present, and can only make their social meaning through direct engagement with others in the present (Gordon 2008, 179). Hauntings are often about the engagements between the human and more-than-human (Whatmore 2006, Gan et al 2017), and thus the examination of the theme of haunting dissolves lines between the ‘natural’ and ‘cultural’ and reinstates voices of overlooked agents (see, for example, Waterton and Saul 2020).

Hauntings have been explored within sociology, cultural geography, cultural studies, literary and film studies, social/cultural anthropology and, increasingly, heritage studies. However, as Gordon (2008) argues, exploring hauntings are essentially an interdisciplinary exercise (see, for example, Tsing et al 2017). Whilst literature, film and music have been the predominant subjects of hauntological interrogation, we have already seen that archaeology has made a significant dent in the possibilities afforded by this analytical framework, and landscapes are ideal subjects for this kind of study. Marrying this with approaches to the ghostly, monstrous and supernatural in folkloristics, and particularly with landscape legends, provide fruitful and worthwhile paths of exploration.

Haunted Landscapes

Hauntings are often highly specific to place and landscape. As Michael Mayerfeld Bell (1997, 831) notes, ‘Ghosts have good reasons to haunt the specific places they do’. They give places and landscapes their particular character: ‘Haunting can be seen as intrinsically resistant to the contraction and homogenization of time and space. It happens when a place is stained by time, or when a particular place becomes the site for an encounter with broken time’ (Fisher 2012, 19). Archaeologists, folklorists and heritage researchers can and should identify these ghosts and explore *why* they haunt, as this gives us a critical understanding of the role and significance of the past in the present and for the future. Further, people *in* the past were also haunted *by* the past. Although not always explicitly framed as ‘hauntings’, archaeological, historical and folkloristic studies have considered the affective and functional qualities of the past in past societies, as, for example, Richard Bradley’s (2014) exploration of the construction and conceptualization of the past and development of a sense of place in prehistoric societies through material encounters and oral traditions. Sarah Semple (1998) has expertly tackled the subject of haunted places and perceptions of the past in early medieval England that reflect the worldviews of Later Anglo-Saxon society (see also Semple 2013) and how these and can be seen in, and impacted, poetry, historical accounts, and physical engagements with such places.

Places gather more than one ghost. Ghosts accumulate in cracks and crevices, mingle, merge or are swept aside by movements, are suppressed, eroded or can even rupture. Waterton and Saul (2020) term such hauntings ‘spectral accretions’ – a much more effective term than the somewhat passive ‘palimpsest’ that has dominated landscape archaeology discourse over the past few decades. Spectral accretions, Waterton and Saul (2020, 3) write, ‘push and pull these underbelly histories into strange narrative shapes’, and anchor spectres into their material spheres.

Spectres of the past can be conjured to specifically build ideologies of the present for the future. As we have seen time and again throughout the histories of archaeology and folklore, '[the] folklore of place can... become a part of national agendas and be used for political goals' (Valk and Sävborg 2018, 7). The political image formed from conceptualisations of the past, present and future as represented by narratives referring to specific places in the landscape is often referred to, particularly within Nordic folkloristics, as the 'mythscape' (e.g. D.S.A. Bell 2003, Knuuttila 2003). Physical features of landscapes (including and especially archaeological remains) can be assimilated into narratives where the ideals of the best future, based on ideologies of the present, are inverted as a mythical past (Knuuttila 2003, 152). When this goes wrong, as we have seen time and time again, we are caught in a 'fatal repetition' (Fisher 2012, 21), where our constructed ghosts and their (ab)uses haunt us locally, nationally, disciplinarily (e.g. Abrahams 1993, Paphitis forthcoming).

Tsing et al (2017) have shown that local ghosts can have global significances. Whilst hauntings are often spoken of at local levels – specific to sites or landscapes – many can also reflect broader national or international anxieties or trauma, whether through guilt or shame as a result of past actions, the need for recognition and restitution, or concerns that history does not repeat itself. As we see in this volume, seismic events such as war or industrialisation can both conjure and suppress spectres. Archaeological and folkloristic enquiries into such hauntings not only enhance our knowledge of these pasts, but can contribute to our understanding of the present and future, and address difficult social, cultural, historical, political and environmental issues.

Lost and threatened futures are often the catalyst for Mark Fisher's (e.g. 2012, 2014, 2016) hauntological interrogations, and are increasingly relevant in an age of threatened extinctions and of imagined futures that demand destruction to be built (Gan et al 2017). Our present and our futures are haunted and threatened both by absences (e.g. deforestation, melting ice, plant and animal extinctions) and by very material ghosts – particularly anthropogenic waste (e.g. plastics, toxic and chemical contamination, carbon emissions) (Harrison 2020, 45; Tsing et al 2017).¹ These are physical manifestations – *matter out of place* (cf. Douglas 1991) – of the spectrality of human behaviour, which stretch conventional temporal, cultural and material foci of archaeologists and challenge our conceptualizations and collection of 'heritage' (Olsen and Pétursdóttir 2016, Harrison et al 2020).

Consuming Ghosts

One of the most popular engagements between people and spectres of place and landscape can be seen in the act of legend-tripping, where individuals or groups of people travel to a place associated with a legend. Although not exclusively pertaining to ghosts and other supernatural beings (they also include the supposed homes and haunts of crazed murderers), sites with legends of ghosts are the most popular. These performances say much more about the present than they necessarily do about the past – reflecting and challenging, for example, gender roles, rites of passage, moral panics and rebellion (see McNeill and Tucker 2018a). Despite its popularity, legend-tripping is a vernacular practice, performed by individuals or informal groups – as McNeill and Tucker (2018b, 9) note, 'Unlike ghost or morbid tourism, which operates for profit, legend trips do not entail money and usually involve small groups of friends'.

Nonetheless, the allure of place-based ghosts is something that heritage managers have been able to seize upon and use in the marketing of heritage sites (Goldstein et al 2007, Simpson 2008), whether through local 'Ghost Walks', site information panels, or 'living history' performers. Indeed, in the UK, ghosts are one of the few pieces of folklore heritage managers do not instantly dismiss and that are, rather, actively encouraged, both through on-site presentations and publications of books such as English Heritage's *Haunted Heritage* (Mason 1999), which presents legends of ghosts associated with their monuments and properties, or their *Eight Ghosts* (Routh 2017), short literary ghost stories inspired by their sites. Embracing these ghosts is not only due to their popularity and marketability, but ghosts, unlike other place and landscape legends, do not necessarily 'challenge' official archaeological or historical interpretations of a site and the past – indeed, the 'historical ghost' (often dressed in costume

appropriate to the period presented) can be used to corroborate them (Paphitis 2020). Hauntings are thus here co-opted to support heritage narratives, whereas, as we have seen above, they are more commonly a way of challenging them.

Folk and archaeological narratives of the supernatural and the spectral are easily repackaged for mass consumption, both as part of heritage tourism and as popular cultural products. Folk ghost stories are antecedents of mass media's ghosts and supernatural entities (Goldstein et al 2007), and the proliferation of popular cultural products has led to an entanglement of folk legends and mass culture. We find common folkloric tropes in popular culture, which are employed so often they border on caricature. Yet, if we dig deeper, these, too, speak to us about power structures and the uncomfortable spectres of the past. Take the notion that a place in the contemporary United States is haunted or otherwise cursed because it is built on an 'Old Indian [Native American] Burial Ground'. The Overlook Hotel from Stephen King's *The Shining* (1977), and Stanley Kubrick's film adaptation (1980),² is just such a place in modern popular culture, and the theme is parodied by Trey Parker in the *South Park* episode 'Spookyfish' (1998). The casual use of this motif belies the significance of the Native American spectre in the history of the US, but its commonality hints to the atrocities suffered (and still being suffered) by its indigenous people: American land 'is haunted because it is stolen' (Bergland 2000, 9). It should be emphasised here that, in referring to the spectre of the North American indigenous past, this should be as a means of exposing and challenging colonial powers, rather than reinforcing them (cf. Cameron 2008). Such motifs in popular culture ghost narratives flag up discussions that should be had about restitution, repatriation and the like, that archaeologists and folklorists are in a key position to address.

Conclusion

Hauntings are about experiences of, and active engagements with, places in a given time. The experiential approach to landscapes has long been a feature of interpretive and contextual archaeologies, but hauntology takes us a step beyond Chris Tilley's seminal *A Phenomenology of Landscape* (1994), with its roots in Heideggerian being-in-the-world. Experiential approaches to landscape features give us a fundamental lens through which we are made aware of, socialise and derive meanings from, landscapes. Hauntology turns this experience of place and landscape simultaneously into *beings-in-the-world* and *being-in-worlds*, as well as forcing us to consider not-being-in-the-world (cf. Fisher 2014, 120; Sartre [1943] 2018). Hauntings, then, are about the presence of the past in the present and future, the persistence of the 'no longer' and of the 'not yet', that cause disjunctures in time and place. Material, immaterial, human and non-human spectres are accreted and anchored into their material places, and archaeological, folkloric and other engagements with them can contribute to addressing broader social, cultural, political and environmental concerns, and to embedding new forms of knowledge in heritage narratives.

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Notes on Contributor

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¹ The particular concern with environmental issues and hauntings is explored in literary studies as *ecospectrality* (see White 2020).

² This is one of the many things that contribute to the hauntological nature of *The Shining*; see Fisher (2012; 2014, 120-7; 206, 112-14) for his extensive treatments of this book and film (including its soundtrack). Stephen King's *Pet Sematary* (1983) and film adaptation (Lambert 1989) also employ the Old Indian Burial Ground motif.