The Empty House: the Ghost of a Memory, the Memory of a Ghost

Richard J. Hand (University of East Anglia)

Sound is inherently uncanny. Literally invisible, it stealthily permeates our environment. We cannot see it, touch it or smell it. But since technological developments during the nineteenth century, we have been able to 'capture' it. The scientist and inventor Thomas Edison was at the forefront of audio technology, notably patenting the phonograph in 1877. Edison's innovation had involved painstaking experimentation and complex scientific understanding. However, his journal reveals that his first successful experiment with sound recording left him not just astounded but terrified: 'I was never so taken aback in my life… Everybody was astonished. I was always afraid of things that worked the first time' (McNichol 2011: 38). Although Edison's intellectual labours ensured that sound recording would work in theory, when it worked in practice it was an overwhelming and disturbing experience. Perhaps we can imagine the impact: a captured voice, invisible and disembodied, talks to people in the room. In this regard, we can see how uncanny is the realm of the auditory: immaterial, time-based and encompassing, what could be more like a *ghost* than sound?

This is particularly apt when it comes to recorded voices, not least from the earliest days of the phonograph. The captured voices of eminent Victorians, short recordings in which phrases surface from the white noise and whorl of crackles and distortion, have an eerie quality. In the 1889 recording of Robert Browning, the poet is at a dinner party reciting one of his poems until he grinds to a halt and announces: 'I'm terribly sorry but I can't remember me own verses…' (Browning 1889). A few moments later, the poet shouts out his own name 'Robert Browning!' to the cheers of the other dinner guests. The recording is less than a minute in duration but takes us from the histrionic declamation of Victorian poetry to a very human moment of amnesia followed by the speaker loudly proclaiming his own name from the obscurity of the past. Similarly, in the 1890 recording of Florence Nightingale, the voice of another famous Victorian speaks to us, seemingly aware of the posterity afforded by Edison's new technology once memory itself has perished: 'When I am no longer even a memory, just a name, I hope my voice may perpetuate the great work of my life' (Wellcome Trust, 2016).

In analysing First World War spoken word recordings – notably the recorded oral testimony of Corporal Edward Dwyer (who was awarded the Victoria Cross but died shortly afterwards in the Somme in 1916) – Tim Crook locates something similarly strange and uncanny. For Crook, Dwyer's informal, London accent combines with our knowledge of his imminent death in the creation of a powerful example of Derridean 'hauntology' wherein the present only exists in relation to the ghosts of the past (Crook, 2014). In these recordings, the dead ceased to be bodies lost or decaying in the

ground but are, despite being invisible, still breathing, talking entities in the passage of time, not fixed in a black and white photograph or names carved onto the marble of a monument. If Robert Browning, Florence Nightingale and Edward Dwyer remain commemorated if not personally 'remembered', the spoken words that Gregory Whitehead hears on his radio are something decaying, forgotten or lost:

> When I turn my radio on, I hear a whole chorus of death rattles: from stone cold, hard fact larynxes frozen in every stage of physical decomposition; from talk show golden throats cut with a scalpel, transected, then taped back together and beamed across the airwaves; from voices that have been severed from the body for so long that none can remember who they belong to, or whether they belong to anybody at all... (Whitehead, 1990, 145)

The impact of hauntology and its implications for sound, memory and identity can also be detected in the realm of experimental music. The recordings of The Caretaker (also known as James Leyland Kirby) use looping fragments of 1920-30s recorded music in ambient and echoing rooms, creating an evocation of amnesia and dementia. The Caretaker's magnum opus *Everywhere at the End of Time* (2016-19) is a six-album series which represents the stages of dementia through progression, loss and disintegration as The Caretaker falls 'further and further towards the abyss of complete memory loss and nothingness' (The Caretaker 2016). As Mark Fisher writes, although the music of The Caretaker (and some other contemporaries) is 'ghostly' in its atmospherics, it is even more critically the auditory embodiment of the principles of hauntology inasmuch as it confronts 'a cultural impasse: the failure of the future.' (Fisher 2012: 16). James Leyland Kirby's choice of the moniker 'The Caretaker' is a conscious homage to Stanley Kubrick's film version of Stephen King's *The Shining* (1980), his name referring to Jack Torrance's job in the Overlook Hotel. As much as charting inexorable descents into dementia, The Caretaker's music also alludes to the ballroom scenes in Kubrick's film. While Jack Torrance declines into madness, murder and death, in James Leyland Kirby's music we find an entropic evocation of amnesia, dementia and failed futures in a musical oeuvre that alludes to film and the adaptation of horror fiction.

The power of sound has long been recognised in Gothic literature. Although we may think of desolate dwellings, empty suits of armour, cobwebbed corridors and apparitions like crumpled linen, it may be the imagined (perhaps even remembered) sounds of chiming bells, baying wolves, howling winds, rolling thunder, eerie whispers, screams in the dark and other 'things that go bump in the night' that can send shivers down our spines and made our hearts beat faster with particular efficacy. Edgar Allan Poe understood this on a profound level and his fiction is permeated with the sounds of screaming cats, nails scratching on coffin lids, and beating hearts. In the tradition of Poe and his many followers, horror film has used the power of sound to total, devious and ingenious effect. From the soundtracks to *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960), *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978) and *It Follows* (David Robert Mitchell, 2014), or the sonic signifiers used in *Ringu* (Hideo Nakata, 1998) and

Insidious (James Wan, 2011) or *Get Out* (Jordan Peele, 2017) sound in horror film does not just determine the depth of our uneasiness or the speed of our pulse rate, it can actually manipulate our perception of (un)reality itself. Of particular relevance to this study and example of creative practice is Isabella van Elferen's observation that 'Sound suggests presence even when this presence is invisible or intangible, and is thus closely related to the ghostly' (van Elferen 2012: 4). In a ghost story, the world of predictable stillness and comforting tranquillity can be shattered and intercepted. For van Elferen, 'sound is presented in Gothic as an empathically ghostly disruption of otherworldly silence' which has the hauntological potential to come from nowhere and signify 'the impossibility of bodiless, timeless beings' (van Elferen 2012: 29). Although Tim Crook's First World War soldier, The Caretaker's deteriorating melodies or the protagonist and captured locations of *The Empty House* may have once existed they become incorporeal and impossible.

While screen horror assimilates the semiotics of vision and sound, the purest use of the auditory in horror performance is to be found in audio drama: after all, sound is literally *everything* in this cultural form. To this end, the history of audio drama has proved itself a formidable arena for innovation and experimentation in horror as well as a forum for the adaptation of Gothic literature (Hand 2006 and 2011). From all-live broadcasts in the early days of radio transmission to binaural experimentation in the digital age, listeners have always had the opportunity to be thrilled or mortified by auditory horror. Horror radio broadcasts from the 1930-50s such as *The Witch's Tale* (1931-38), *Mercury Theater on the Air*'s 'War of the Worlds' (1938), *Inner Sanctum Mysteries* (1941-52) and the BBC series *Appointment with Fear* (1943-55) with its host, 'The Man in Black', have all taken on a legendary status in cultural history. These broadcasts thrived on their 'liveness', utilising the immediacy and simultaneity of the medium, broadcasting into the intimate space of the individual listener's domestic and personal environment. In our own time, audio has lost nothing of its essential intimacy but has evolved into a proliferation of platforms: the digital world curates and creates more audio than we could listen to in a lifetime. Although we can shape and tailor our listening, this does not stop our listening shaping and tailoring us. The ubiquity and intimate power of audio reminds us again of the inherent uncanniness of the auditory. Sound can immerse us, it can infuse a room, a car or the space between our ears: invisible, immaterial, time-based, fluctuating and evolving, what can be more ghostlike than sound itself?

The Empty House: Audio Play

The Empty House, the sound recording that accompanies this article, hopes to be an example of 'pure' horror audio inasmuch as it is a ghost story that would be nearly impossible to realise in visual form. The author has had similar intentions with other audio plays. In *Zachariah 1864* (winner of Chatterbox Audio Theater's 2014 Halloween competition), a couple use a séance to encounter a distant relative killed on the battlefields of the American Civil War. Once summoned, the forsaken young soldier endlessly relives the agony of his violent death and reaches out in desperate friendship

to his descendants, only to have them reject him in disgust (Hand 2014). Similarly, in the author's live audio play 'The Picture', part of *Classic Thrills and Chills! Horror Theatre and Radio Drama from the Golden Age!* (Hand 2017) commissioned for the Hallowed Histories Festival in Norwich, the 'visionless' potential of audio is exploited when a couple buy an oil painting but see completely different images on the canvas with diabolical consequences (*Classic Thrills and Chills*, 2017). While *Zachariah 1864* and *The Picture* tease the audience with objects and manifestations they cannot see but are dramatically mediated through the witnesses in the stories, *The Empty House* is even more 'purely audio' in its use of first-person narrative and recording technology.

Isabella van Elferen contends that 'Recorded sound is always-already hauntological, imposing on listeners sounds that thwart the presence of the present both in terms of chronology and of embodiment' (van Elferen 2012: 188). *The Empty House* consciously explores these ideas, the play being determined through the dominating account of an increasingly unreliable narrator. The estate agent's insistence on his samples of 'proof' and the logic of his narrative is mediated through his trusty Dictaphone. Applying what van Elferen argues is the 'schizophrenia of recording technology' (van Elferen 2012: 188), the estate agent's evidence and testimony can be seen as being out-of-time and out-of-body while paradoxically exploiting the time-based intimacy of audio. The estate agent talks in absolute confidence into our ears and we receive recordings mediated within a recording while background sounds from the current location of the estate agent – the loft – filter through to us. At the end of the day, the production of *The Empty House* is a recorded work of sound that presents a play about noise in which there is literally nothing to see.

The Empty House was recorded on a Tascam in a variety of spaces within a rented house in Norwich, UK, in the summer of 2017. A 1930s detached house, the property offered a range of interesting opportunities to capture audio, from various rooms with original features, a garage, an outside toilet, an Anderson air-raid shelter in the verdant garden and, of course, a loft. Many recordings of the script were made and appraised before the strongest takes were assembled and edited using Audacity software. The uncanny moments in which the 'ghost' manifests were created through the deployment of a variety of physically created sounds manipulated through Audacity effect options, including 'Echo' and the 'PaulStretch' time-stretch tool. Although PaulStretch is capable of stretching audio up to a billion times its original length (Jarvis, 2010), the use of the tool in *The Empty House* was much more modest, distorting speech, singing and other sounds into eerie, discordant and reverberating noise. The uncanny sections strive to be deliberately unnerving and even, at times, aggressive. Some of the sounds are cyclical: 'ghost time' in *The Empty House* often stands still or rather repeats in small fragments that reverberate with increasing depth. The sounds may make the listener jump or shudder emerging, as they do, in stark juxtaposition to the professional rhetoric and gently unfurling confessions of the estate agent. Part of this contrast is designed for comic and satirical effect: there is an element of schadenfreude in trapping an estate agent in a house and witnessing his doomed standoff with a ghost, who he is only able to interpret (through his professional

training) as a tenant who cannot move on, in flagrant transgression of the tenancy agreement (of life and death). A particularly important moment is the 'ghostly lullaby'. Edited to be distorted, discordant and downright creepy, the estate agent may describe it as 'not unpleasant' but the listener may consider it horrific (or even grotesquely humorous).

In *The Empty* House, a man sits in the loft of the building of the title. While the man speaks confidentially into his Dictaphone, in the background we hear birdsong from the rooftops and occasionally vehicles pass on the road below. In this intimate setting, he talks directly to an audience of one – you, the listener. The man who recounts his story is an estate agent. It is an interesting profession which permits someone to enter properties which are not one's own in order to measure, describe and sell them. A profession concerned with the materiality of photographs and dimensions but never sound. The estate agent in *The Empty House* has years of professional experience behind him, but a series of auditory phenomena have puzzled, haunted and ultimately bewitched him. The estate agent is perhaps enthralled by the ghost, rather like the young knight in John Keats' 'La Belle Dame sans Merci' (1819), who we see wasting away to inevitable death in a wilderness unable to stop himself awaiting the return of the supernatural enchantress. In contrast, while Keats' knight is in a realm where 'no birds sing', the estate agent wastes away to the backdrop of birdsong and occasional traffic noise. In another poem, 'This living hand, now warm and capable' (1819), John Keats speculates on the haunting horrors of the tomb but is steadfast in holding his hand towards us while the estate agent in *The Empty House* is aware, as he disappears into the immateriality of the auditory, that he is powerless to do so. Nevertheless, the estate agent is adamant in his assumption that he has your undivided attention as he recounts his story and justifies his actions. The play uses the first-person Gothic in the tradition of Edgar Allan Poe. We are placed in the intimate company of the speaker, and on occasion it may feel that we are placed inside his head. Who is this man? Is he the witness to paranormal phenomena which he has captured on his Dictaphone? Is he a victim of midlife crisis and breakdown? Is he a deluded madman? Or is he something else entirely?

The Empty House makes intertextual allusions aside from Keats, Poe and other 'haunting' houses reverberate through the loft of the empty building: Carl Jung's dream-house; the impossible spaces of Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000); the memory-capturing walls of Nigel Kneale's *The Stone Tape* (1972); and the haunted hotels in Stephen King's *The Shining* (1977) and Ti West's *The Innkeepers* (2011). But we also have the aching melancholy of William Faulkner's houses that are seemingly empty and breathless (as in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929)) or contain horrifying secrets ('A Rose for Emily' (1930)). Citing Faulkner's *Sanctuary* (1931), John Corrigan notes that 'the empty house is often gendered female in American fiction' (Corrigan 2016: 116). Significantly, the entity that the estate agent believes haunts the empty house is – or was – an old lady. Whether a spinster, a widow or a mother whose children have flown the nest, the sole woman can be constructed as a figure of dread, whether the candy-cottage dwelling witch in the Brothers Grimm fairy tale 'Hansel and Gretel' (1812), Miss Havisham in Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* (1861) or

countless other incarnations. Victorian patriarchy established the ideal of the 'angel of the house' and concomitant domestic values of motherhood, and numerous examples of horror and the uncanny exploit or allude to the failure of this. In such works, we witness isolated, non-maternal (and frequently embittered and destructive) women inhabiting barren houses, the yawning void of which should be filled with families and children. Although the estate agent decides to stay for as long as it takes to defy the spirit, we begin to sense that when he begins to adopt the old lady's habits, he is beginning to meld into the house, becoming the old lady himself (perhaps he always was?). If this is the case, the estate agent becomes like Norman Bates in *Psycho* (1960), whose isolation, delusion and matricidal guilt imbue his empty house with the strict authority of a lost, but not forgotten, matriarch, a figure of terror and desire. The estate agent in *The Empty House* also owes something to haunting tragedies of real life: Joyce Vincent (1965-2003), a young woman who died alone in her flat in a bustling area of London but remained undiscovered for over two years, the mystery of the case exacerbated by the fact that her corpse was so decayed it was impossible to ascertain the cause of death; or Donald Crowhurst (1932-69), the amateur yachtsman who became lost at sea during a desperate attempt to clear his debts by solo-circumnavigating the world in a sailing competition and whose extant journal reveals a descent into delusion and insanity.

Perhaps in the estate agent we hear someone who reflects the appeal of ghosts, a desperation to believe they are 'true' whatever they are. A ghost can give meaning and function in opposition to the true horror of oblivion, void and a total, eternal *emptiness*. It would certainly seem that harmony is in the ear of the listener: the reverberations, echoes and distortions that surround the ghost are seemingly 'pleasant' to the estate agent. The materiality of houses and the people who inhabit them become a memory. The audio the estate agent harvests in the empty house are part of a story he has attempted to preserve for posterity but will ultimately become nothing but the erratic soundwaves of captured noise. Perhaps, ironically, sound is destruction and negation for as Jacques Attali observes '*noise is violence*: it disturbs. To make noise is to interrupt a transmission, to disconnect, to kill' (Attali 1985: 26).

So finally, who is the estate agent? A witness? A victim? A perpetrator? A ghost? Whatever he is, ultimately he will disappear.

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