

# The Atmospheric Forteanism of *Hellier* and the Role of Sound in Recent Practices of Paranormal Investigation

## Introduction

This article proposes an approach based on sound studies to highlight the affective and atmospheric dimensions of contemporary practices of paranormal investigation. It aims at understanding how, in contemporary forms of paranormal practices, everyday spaces, situations and events are progressively charged with the potentiality of invisible supernatural agencies at work. Moreover, the paper examines the processes by which this potential is captured and actualised through experiments and on-site investigations, focused on the establishment of a communication with alleged paranormal agencies. In particular, it will trace the affective and pre-representational dimension of such processes, which heavily rely on ecological interactions with and within the surrounding environments. Instead of conceiving the paranormal as an ontological impossibility to be analysed in narrative, psychological or socio-constructivist terms, the paper focuses on the experiential dynamics of the paranormal, conceiving it in its resonances with the affective, embodied and performative dimensions of the everyday. In other words, the focus is shifted from *why* paranormal *entities* culturally emerge and get represented, to *how* certain processes, events and practices are able to trigger specific sensations of agency that are charged with supernatural meaning.

The main case study analysed in the paper is *Hellier*, an ongoing independent documentary series directed by Karl Pfeiffer and produced by Planet Weird. To this day, *Hellier* is composed of two seasons, both aired in 2019 on YouTube and Amazon Prime Video. The documentary is centered around a group of Americans and Canadian paranormal researchers – Greg Newkirk, Dana Newkirk, Connor J. Randall, Tyler Strand, and Karl Pfeiffer himself – investigating a case of alleged entities hiding in abandoned mines and disturbing the locals of the town of Hellier, in eastern Kentucky. The crew gets formed after Greg Newkirk receives mysterious e-mails from an individual describing first-hand encounters with unexplainable agencies and the constant state of fear that this was producing upon his family, which would eventually force them to leave the town of Hellier. Such entities are described as ‘goblin’-like, but their characteristics seem to cut across the whole American paranormal lore: their physical appearance shares similarities with many extraterrestrial accounts, is reminiscent of the typical trope of poltergeist activity – tapping the windows, producing unexplained noises – and the evidence that the man produces in the e-mails – photos of three-toed footprints – directly connects with the modes of cryptozoology. The e-mail communication is suddenly interrupted and the man disappears, leaving the group unable to pinpoint the precise location of the alleged events. Throughout its fifteen episodes, the series follows the investigators researching these alleged creatures, trying to find the man who first contacted them, discovering the ‘high strangeness’ lore of the place and, at the same time, developing a peculiar investigative approach which involves on-site explorations, ritualised experiments and an almost psychogeographical interaction with place. The series gained a vast popularity, particularly among paranormal communities online, where it triggered an ongoing debate around its themes, its places, and its distinctive approach to the paranormal. Sonic interactions and listening ecologies are crucial for the understanding of the experience of the paranormal in the case of *Hellier*: the vast majority of the phenomena which are interpreted as paranormal are in fact

sonic-based. Moreover, sound is in *Hellier* the principal medium of interaction employed during the experiments, often with the use of multiple audio technologies, such as radios, signal generators and electronic musical instruments.

Sound is the main epistemological tool that will be used to investigate the aforementioned processes. However, with its focus on the sonic, this article does not intend to underestimate the role of other sensory modalities in the experiences that will be analysed, nor does it aim to reduce the paranormal to a set of ambiguous sonic encounters, auditory hallucinations or self-deceptive pareidolia. Instead, it argues that tracing the sonic allows the unveiling of processes, relationships and dynamics which might remain overlooked when adopting visual-centered analytical tools. When described through the lenses of the sonic, the paranormal thus becomes a process, a becoming, a field of pre-representational potentials and resonances, which challenges taken for granted dualisms and fixed epistemological structures, through a “joint, coordinated, relational activity in which affect and discourse twine together” (Wetherell 2013: 363).

## **Theoretical Framework**

The analysis of the series *Hellier* here conducted focuses on how the sensation of the supernatural emerges from affective, embodied processes, with particular emphasis on the role of space and of ecological interactions happening during the on-site research. A relevant theoretical starting point is the concept of the eerie as defined by Fisher in his popular *The Weird and the Eerie* (2017). The book is a study born from the necessity of a new critical approach to what “lies beyond standard perception, cognition and experience” (Ibid.:8), aimed at freeing cultural studies from the hegemonic — and most often inaccurate (Ibid.:9) — use of the Freudian’s *unheimlich*, which “operates by always processing the outside through the gaps and impasses of the inside” (Ibid.:10). In this regard, Fisher’s notion of the weird involves “a sensation of wrongness” (Ibid.:15): the unsettling experience of a (material) presence that should not exist, and therefore obliterates any attempt to frame it within an established system of knowledge. Conversely, the eerie is “constituted by a failure of absence or by a failure of presence” (Ibid.:61). It marks a shift from a question of presence to a “question of agency” (Ibid.:11): the eerie is experienced when the doubt that arise does not only address the nature of the agencies involved but questions the very presence of an intentional agency at all (Ibid.:63). In this paper, the eerie is not conceived as a fixed state but rather as a process, a liminal and transitional condition emerging from a ‘failure’ of clear ontological separation between presence and absence – and between chance and intentionality – which makes the experiencer question the existence of an agency behind seemingly unexplainable events, thus determining an “*uncanny affordance* to material geographies” (Holloway and Kneale 2008: 304). Fisher points out how this sensation stands in-between everyday experiences and cultural representations: although being “certainly triggered by particular cultural forms, it does not originate in them. We can and often do encounter the sensation of the eerie in the raw, without the need for specific forms of cultural mediation” (Fisher 2017:61). Moreover, it most often involves a strong spatial and environmental dimension (Ibid.). The eerie is strongly related to marginal and non-visual modes of perception, and, relevantly, Fisher claims that “the shift to sound opens up the eerie” (Ibid.:81).

In this paper, the sensation of the eerie is understood as a process in which the affective experience of space assumes a crucial importance. To understand the relationship between the eerie and pre-representational theories, the paper draws from the theoretical field of affective

atmospheres, which also allows for a fruitful connection between sound, place and an embodied conceptualisation of paranormal experiences. For Anderson (2009) the term atmosphere “seems to express something vague [...] that exceeds rational explanation and clear figuration, something that hesitates at the edge of the unsayable” (Ibid: 78). Atmospheres are described as “object-like emotions, which are randomly cast into a space” (Böhme 2000: 15). For Böhme (2016), they are *quasi-objective*: they can be conceived as subjective sensations which are however experienced as “something “out there,” something which can come over us, into which we are drawn, which takes possession of us like an alien power” (Ibid: 38). Michiels (2015) explains how affective atmospheres are “neither solely located in material environment nor solely in the human body, but emerging from the resonances between its various components” (Ibid: 257). Atmospheres, in fact are not experienced as mere encounters with external objects but, in Stewart’s view (2011), they emerge as forms of attunements. When reading affective atmospheres defined as the “felt presence of something or someone in space” (Böhme 2016: 99), or the “sensing of something happening that can be felt” (McCormack 2015: 91), it appears clear that the concept can be effectively employed to understand the dynamics of the eerie. In the analysis conducted below the sensation of the eerie will be conceptualised as a form of affective atmosphere involving specific sonic ecologies.

Sound has a particularly tight relationship with atmospheres: for Gallagher (2016), in fact, atmospheres can – and often are – triggered by auditory relationships. Bennett (2001) states that the sensation of enchantment – closely related to the eerie – requires a “cultivated form of perception, a discerning and meticulous attentiveness to the singular specificity of things (ibid: 37), with listening having a crucial role in this attentiveness, as “sonorous experience is central to enchantment” (ibid: 36). For this reason, sound will be employed as tool to trace the emergence, the amplification, transformation and propagation of affective atmospheres of the eerie in *Hellier*. Given the importance of space and ecological interactions in the *Hellier*’s investigations, the focus will not be on the ‘acousmatic’ dimension of sound, or its morphological relationship with cognitive ambiguity and imaginative processes (Smalley 2007). Instead, it will rely on an ‘ecology of listening’ approach, whereby soundscape “is not an object, but instead a constant experience we live in” (Berrens 2016:2) and listeners “do not merely occupy a space or a context, they are constitutive of the context set to sound-making” (Di Scipio 2015). Moreover, sound studies will be employed to highlight how the materialities of sound are able to establish relationships which relate with a phenomenology of the ephemeral and the virtual: “Sound hints at the improbability of one truth and meaning of thing and instead opens the imagination to the possibility of all that could be” (Voegelin 2014: 94). Voegelin conceives listening as the opening of a “paradise of sonic possibilities, free not only from ontological restraint but also from the truth and necessity that a visual logic demands.” (ibid: 33). For the researcher, such possibilities can be “illogical, contradictory, and untrue in relation to the idea of an object” (ibid), and they are characterised by a transitoriness in which what is actually existing is constantly renegotiated as just one of the many other “possibilities hidden in the invisibility of its passing” (ibid: 92). Through the sonic world, therefore, it is possible to access a space which is not objectively fixed but rather exists as an everchanging field of potentials:

Listening I hear the possibility of life-worlds that are not delineated by the visible but conjured from the invisible in sound, whose actuality is negotiated continually rather than assumed. (Voegelin 2014: 37)

It is through this conceptualisation of the sonic that this paper then attempts at delineating a realist approach to the eerie. As mentioned before, listening is conceived as a process which is

never merely descriptive but also constructive of the listened event and, in particular, of the agential relationships between listening subjects and listened objects. In this sense, the processes detailed during the analysis of *Hellier* could be read through the lenses of Barad's agential realism (Barad 2007): listening then assumes the form of an intra-action, a onto-epistemological process which precedes and effectively produces the agential cut from which distinctions between observing subjects and observing objects are made:

[...] individually determinate entities do not exist [...] A phenomenon is a specific intra-action of an "object" and the "measuring agencies"; the object and the measuring agencies emerge from, rather than precede, the intra-action that produces them" (Barad 2007:145)

In particular, Barad's formulation of agency will be of crucial importance for this study, as a guide to understand how the sensation of the eerie – as a "question of agency" (Fisher 2017:11) – emerges from specific assemblages:

[A]gency is a matter of intra-acting; it is an enactment, not something someone or something has. Agency cannot be designated as an attribute of "subjects" or "objects" (as they do not preexist as such). Agency is about the possibilities and accountability entailed in refiguring material-discursive apparatuses of bodily production, including the boundary articulations and exclusions that are marked by those practices. (Barad 1999:7)

Moreover, an agential realist approach allows for a reconciliation between the material and the discursive, making it possible to

acknowledge nature, the body, and materiality in the fullness of their becoming without resorting to [...] the theoretization of the human as either pure cause or pure effect while at the same time remaining absolutely accountable for the role "we" play in the intertwined practices of knowing and becoming. (Barad 2003:812)

Through an agential realist approach is therefore possible to trace the processes of the paranormal experience from a non-dualistic point of view, and the practices performed in *Hellier* as "material-discursive" practices [...] recognized as being productive rather than merely descriptive" (Barad 1999: 2).

## ***Hellier* in the context of contemporary paranormal investigation**

*Hellier*, while presenting some specificities which will be highlighted throughout the paper, can be related to the broader field of practices commonly defined as paranormal investigation. The notion of paranormal investigation encompasses a vast range of discourses, techniques and practices aimed at experiencing, communicating with – and, often, at finding evidence of – inexplicable phenomena which are conceived as supernatural in origin. The origin of paranormal investigation practices can be traced back to psychical research and to Victorian spiritualism at the end of the nineteenth century (Eaton, 2020: 7). While persisting throughout the twentieth century, such practices have seen a sharp rise in interest from the beginning of the 2000s (Hill 2017), alongside other "modern forms of enchantment" (Holloway 2010: 618) such as dark tourism and ghost hunting. These are considered by some scholars (Carlton 1987)

as new forms of spiritual practices, which distance themselves from institutionalised religious systems, to a “shift toward an individualized modes of belief and practice” (Eaton 2015: 390). Others (Ironside 2018) see the recent interest in paranormal practice as “undoubtedly influenced by a concurrent supernatural boom in popular culture” (102), highlighting the particular role of the popular British reality television program *Most Haunted* and its successors.

Although *Hellier* surely shares some similarities with the ‘traditional’ paranormal reality show, its approaches, methodologies and ultimately its foundational aims are fundamentally different. The typical methodologies of investigation displayed in TV programs such as *Most Haunted* – or more recently in documentaries such as *The House In Between* and the series *The Secret of Skinwalker Ranch*, for instance – are strongly evidence-based, focused on ensuring “as “scientific” an investigation into the purported haunted site as possible and to attempt to debunk any immediate claims that the phenomena experienced are paranormal” (Koven 2007: 187). They are characterised by the wide use of electronic sensor and audiovisual technological equipment to gather measurable evidence and to ‘scientifically’ assess the reality of the claimed phenomena. In *Hellier* there is no attempt to scientifically demonstrate the existence of the paranormal. Instead, the paranormal rises from dynamics involving peripheral perceptions, sensations, feelings. Methodologically, the investigators in *Hellier* set up experiments not to record hard evidence of supposed paranormal phenomena but rather to create the conditions for the emergence of a sensation of communication with invisible agencies, which are experienced through ecological interactions and affective encounters. Another relevant specificity of *Hellier* resides in its decisively pre-representational and multidisciplinary approach to the paranormal discourse. As investigator Greg Newkirk states early in the series:

We really strongly believe that if more paranormal researchers would communicate with each other from different communities – like, ghost hunters don’t typically talk to bigfoot hunters, and bigfoot hunters don’t really talk with UFO investigators, but if they did, they’d notice that there’s a lot of weird crossovers there. (Hellier 2019)

This attitude strongly emerges throughout the series. In fact, although *Hellier* begins with strong ufological and cryptozoological references, it successively greatly expands to encompass multiple instances of the occultural milieu, such as: ghost hunting, chaos magick, ceremonial occultism, wicca, Thelema, conspiracies, bigfoot lore, psychical research, parapsychology, divination and even ancient Greek mythology. This approach is clearly indebted by the so-called *Fortean* approach (Dixon 2007), inspired in particular by writers such as John Keel (1975) and Jacques Vallée (1969), whose work – highly influential for the *Hellier* crew - was devoted to gather the multiplicity of paranormal phenomena under a unifying theory of a resonance between the physical and the psychical, the experiential and the fictional, the material and the cultural.

## **The process of the paranormal experience in *Hellier***

The following sections will trace the ways the *Hellier*’s crew encounters, performs and enacts the sensation of the eerie (Fisher 2017), charging the explored places, the context and the events that characterise their case with the potentiality of the presence of supernatural agencies. As mentioned above, the focus on the sonic allows for a deeper understanding of the affective, atmospheric and non-representational aspects of *Hellier*. The conducted analysis reveals a process of gradual construction of the sensation of the paranormal which articulates through four principal stages. First, the investigators pose a peculiar attentiveness towards subtle and

undefined sensations, registering and sharing the feeling of experiencing a different, ‘weird’ atmosphere. Subsequently, they engage in performative actions in situ, to affectively attune with such atmosphere, through a ritualised focus on listening to the sonic ecologies of the place. Then, the investigators perform a series of sonic-based practices, involving audio technologies such as radio receivers, to construct a communicative channel with the eerie agencies of the place. Finally, this communication effort gets expanded with the use of sound as activator of the natural resonances of the investigated places, with the use of tone generators diffusing specific frequencies. However, while these stages can be easily identified throughout the series, it is important to note that the formal separation of four phases of the process of the eerie in *Hellier* is adopted only for analytical purposes, and that what is here presented in a linear progression is instead a complex field of interaction and practice which continuously oscillates between narration and embodied sensations, between spontaneous encounters and deliberate practices.

### **The encounter with the atmosphere of the *eerie***

In *Hellier*, peripheral and subtle senses of place do not only serve a suggestive or narrative purpose but instead have a constitutive role in the investigative methodology of the crew, and in their very conceptualisation of the paranormal. This emerges preponderantly in the beginning phases of the investigation when, during the first three episodes, the crew conducts the first exploration of the town of Hellier and of its surroundings. The introductory first episode makes the viewers acquainted with the background of the case, the events that triggered the investigation and how the crew was formed. In the second episode, Greg, Dana, Connor and Karl begin the first proper exploration of the town in Kentucky. The episode follows the crew’s travel to Hellier, from the highway to the tight roads passing through the mountains of Pike County, where the town is situated. The camera shows the scenery as seen from the car, alternated with the participants reflecting on the sensations they felt during the journey. The place is rarely described in geographical or physical terms. Instead, the investigators recurrently mention the ‘vibe’ felt while reaching the area, detailing the emotional and subjective feelings about a place which is described as “dead”, and “in the middle of nowhere” (Hellier 2019), and the sense of desolation triggered by the seemingly abandoned construction sites that punctuate the road. The narration is entirely atmospheric, focusing on unsettling impressions seemingly emerging from mysterious qualities of the place itself:

It was not a pleasant feeling. It’s not a comfortable place to be. [...] I was uncomfortable, like, very apprehensive about being there, hyperaware of myself being in this environment. [There] is just a weird feeling to Hellier. (Hellier 2019)

This weird feeling arises subtly and without any apparent recognisable cause. The place *feels* weird not as a consequence of unexplainable events but as a sensation arising from an unusual awareness of the participants towards their presence within the environment. While the place might still seem perfectly ordinary, “the normalized and familiar possibilities for action [...] are made strange and unfamiliar” (Holloway and Kneale 2008:304). This peculiar sense of place becomes crucial part of the investigation as it marks the crossing of an invisible, non-representational threshold: the ordinary, everyday world has been left, and a new, different territory is being approached, one haunted by different and unknown potentials of ‘affect and being affected’. This boundary-crossing event is not rationally perceived as external or objective, but rather entirely felt as a “resonation, or interference pattern” (Massumi 2002:14) of different affective intensities:

“Like, you drive into it and it’s an overwhelming, weird vibe.” (Hellier 2019)

There is a recurrent use of the term ‘vibe’, to express such anomalous sensations in *Hellier*. Interestingly, vibratory metaphors of shivering and trembling assume a particular relevance in the context of the encounter with affective atmospheres. The atmosphere “involves the felt-body with consequences on the physical one [...] (‘it is hair-rising’, ‘it makes you shiver’, ‘it gives you goose bumps’, etc.) [...]” (Griffero 2016:74). For Griffero, these feelings are what connects the atmosphere with the experience of the numinous introduced by Otto (1936), a concept which is closely related to the sensation of the eerie:

A theory of the spatiality of feelings cannot but acknowledge its debt towards the theory [...] of the numinous. The *mysterium tremendum* is, in fact, the atmosphere that fluctuates in the air in a given place, without a whence and a where-to, but that arouses a ‘faint shiver’ (Griffero 2016:73)

Through these atmospheric intensities, *Hellier* is felt as a territory which is more than just a physical space but a field of unknown potential encounters and interactions. The ‘weird vibe’ of the place is also the first hint that *Hellier* could be inhabited by different – and potentially malevolent – agencies:

“I felt like it didn’t, at that time, want us to be there” (Hellier 2019)

There is here a clear demonstration of the ‘questions of agency’ that mark the production of the sense of the eerie. Before any representation in supernatural terms, the agencies that the investigators feel remain within the realm of the affective sensations of atmosphere: an agency of the place itself, which never reveals itself objectively but that, at the same time, feels more than just a trick of the imagination, and which subtly undermines every familiarity with the place. This feeling sets the ground for the events to come: after the spontaneous encounter with the ‘weird’ atmosphere, the sense of the paranormal will then be “fostered through deliberate strategies” (Bennett 2001:4), by amplifying such atmosphere and progressively attuning to the sonorous affects of the place.

### **Listening as atmospheric attunement**

Once arrived in *Hellier*, the investigators conduct a preliminary survey of the area, interrogating the locals dwelling around the gas station’s pizza shop, which appears to be the social centre of the little town. They ask about any information potentially relevant for the case, as well as any strange experience that the persons are willing to share. Disappointingly, nothing of particular relevance is revealed: the town of *Hellier* is indeed an ordinary place, defying any particular interest for paranormal research. This creates a friction with the sensations felt while approaching the place, demonstrating how the sensation of the paranormal is not, in this case, an immediate irruption within the everyday world but rather a gradual process that involves practice and a specific attitude: the second phase of the investigation thus begins, with the crew actively reconnecting with the eerie atmosphere initially registered.

That afternoon the investigators reach the accommodation they rented for the night, a wooden cabin situated in the town’s vicinity, surrounded by a forest. Here, after sunset, they perform what they define “intention setting experiments” (Hellier 2019): ritualised interactions with the

place, aimed at “stir[ing] up” any potential “activity” (Hellier 2019) hidden in the environment. Such preparatory rituals are common practice in paranormal investigations (Eaton 2015), and their performance can incorporate a wide range of methods, depending on the participants’ personal belief systems and spiritual position (ibid.). In *Hellier*, most of these rituals are conducted by Dana Newkirk, who identifies herself as a practicing witch: her rituals are influenced by the traditions of natural magic and witchcraft and often involve food offerings to spirits “elemental in nature or land-based” (Hellier 2019). In general, the ‘intention setting experiments’ performed by the crew are focused on deepening their connection with the surrounding environments, through focusing and attentive concentration. The engagement with affective atmospheres is once again central: the aim is here to attune with the place, becoming able to read its movements and resonate with them. The experiments territorialise their presence in a place they felt as different and unwelcoming, by setting their positive exploratory intentions “through the active affordance and constitutive role of matter in ordering the emergent force of the possible supernatural” (Holloway 2016: 624):

“A deep breath, exhale. We want to send out the intention that we’re here to communicate, with anything intelligent that [...] might take up residence in here, anything we might refer to as a “goblin”, or maybe a “critter”, a ghost, an entity. [...] It exists. [...] That word exists: contact.” (Hellier 2019)

In this quote from a later experiment, Greg Newkirk clearly demonstrates the series’ pre-representational approach to the paranormal. The call for communication they send is not directed towards a specific supernatural entity – with fixed characteristics and defined communicative modes – but rather towards a pure experience of affective relationships with something whose nature and behaviour is not taken for granted. As a consequence of such an ontologically mobile and shapeshifting conceptualisation of the paranormal, the fixed objectivity of the vision ends up losing its epistemological primacy: as an agency whose presence is never fully revealed, the *Phenomenon* in *Hellier* is something that cannot be seen but is rather experienced as atmospheric attunement, emerging from a constant oscillation between subjective feelings and external events. The phenomenon is born of that oscillation, that “resonation” (Massumi 2002:14) between affective intensities. It is precisely within this network of pre-representational agencies and interactions that the sonorous dimension of atmospheres assumes its crucial importance, as material but impalpable interactions, immersive and often existing in-between perception and hallucination:

“We’re talking about potential Native American spirits, aliens, goblins. It’s all right in this area. And [...] we’re the only people, we can say with near certainty, tonight, listening.” (Hellier 2019)

At first, it would seem that Connor is here talking about a mere auditory attentiveness to the surroundings: the progressive “adaptation of the ear to a new sound environment” (Augoyard and Torgue 2006: 35) which “may lead to a refinement of listening, a better reception of weaker sounds and stronger attention [...]” (ibid.). A listening directed towards any weird sound – a sound that “does not belong” (Fisher 2017:15) – potentially occurring in the woods around the cabin. Seen this way, this perceptual condition reminds the *écouter* listening mode of Schaefferian tradition, which conceives a clear separation between listening subject and sonorous environment:

[...] *écouter* designates a mode of listening that is securely bound to the natural attitude, where sounds are heard immediately as indices of objects and events in the



world. *Écouter* situates sounds in the surrounding sonorous milieu, grasps their distance and spatial location, and identifies their source and cause on the basis of sonic characteristics. (Kane 2014: 27)

This position surely has a role in the investigations in *Hellier*: multiple times in fact the crew is unsettled by sound events whose invisible source is so ambiguous that makes any attempt at rationally categorise it impossible. However, by recalling the communicative intent which is at the core of the *Hellier* investigative approach, the ‘listening’ which Connor mentions becomes, first and foremost, a call to recognise that the soundscape is never ontologically and epistemologically separated from the listeners (Ingold 2007), and that the listeners are themselves an integral and active part of it. Sound then reveals its fundamentally relational dimension, and listening becomes an active and productive interaction:

I am in the soundscape through my listening to it and in turn the soundscape is what I listen to, perpetually in the present. [...] [S]ound is a relationship not between things but just a relationship, passing through my ears. (Voegelin 2010: 83)

Therefore, that night, surrounded by that field of auditory relationalities and acoustic intersubjective agencies, “[t]he spectre of sound unsettles the idea of visual stability and involves us as listeners in the production of an invisible world” (Voegelin 2010:12): with the simple act of listening, this invisible world is at the same time discovered and produced. Moreover, the realisation that they are the only *people* listening radically shifts the focus from a human-centered dimension, to include a much broader relationship in action with the infinite diversity of potential agencies: some non-human, some even super-natural. The ‘listening’ mentioned is therefore the listening in silence of this invisible world – and *to* the silence of the night – waiting for those natural background noises to unveil their communicative intent:

[A]n attention to the matterings, the complex emergent worlds, happening in everyday life. [...] The kinds of agency that might or might not add up to something with some kind of intensity or duration. The enigmas and oblique events and background noises that might be barely sensed and yet are compelling. (Stewart 2011: 445)

Such background noises, normally overheard, are not relevant as sound objects – as references to specific physical sources hidden from sight (Smalley 2007) but, rather as “a message, a bit of information producing panic: an interruption, a corruption, a rupture of information” (Serres 2013:4). Noise, in fact, is “an essentially relational concept” (Novak and Sakakeeny 2015:126), a medium whose message reveals the very potentiality of communication and, in the case of the paranormal investigation, of eerie agencies eavesdropped while being “immersed entirely in listening” (Nancy 2009:4).

### **The sensation of the paranormal through sonic practices**

The ‘intention setting experiment’ analysed above, together with a “willingness and expectation to be enchanted” (Holloway 2010: 626), generates “a simultaneous opening up to possibility and indeterminacy” (ibid.): the potential that within the territory of *Hellier* things could sonically behave – and react to the investigators – in unusual ways, revealing the movements of mysterious agencies of the place itself. With this process, new “practiced senses of space are disrupted and refigured, displaced and dislocated.” (Holloway and Kneale 2008:

304), activating a channel of communication with potential eerie agencies of the place. Throughout the episodes of the series, this is achieved by performing a wide range of practices, most of which are heavily sound-centered and involving audio technologies, as catalysts of interactions with the surrounding auditory environment. The use of technological instrumentation is common in paranormal investigation practices, where it has a territorialising function which “creates and augments spaces” (Espirito Santo and Barcelò 2021: 7) within which the affective intensities at the basis of the sensation of the eerie “find their momentary peak” (ibid.). Most of the instruments employed in *Hellier* are sonic-based – radios, recorders, musical instruments, noise generators – or based on electromagnetic resonant processes – such as the debated God Helmet, a wearable device developed by the controversial psychologist Michael Persinger to allegedly enhance latent psychical abilities through exposing the brain to low frequency electromagnetic waves (Ruttan, Persinger and Koren 1990).

The first experiment is conducted shortly after the ritual described above, during the first night in the cabin outside of Hellier. Here, Connor performs what they call an *Estes Method* session, a reinterpretation of the ghost box experiment, one of the cornerstones of contemporary ghost hunting practices. The ghost box – developed in the late nineties by paranormal researcher and maker Frank Sumption – is a radio receiver whose tuning circuit is modified to continuously sweep across the electromagnetic spectrum, thus producing a fragmented collage of randomised voices, sounds, music and interferences from multiple radio feeds. In the Spiritualist tradition of Electronic Voice Phenomena practices radio receivers are believed to allow disembodied spirits to communicate with the living by manipulating the incoming electromagnetic waves and recomposing the broadcasts into new meaningful sentences (Enns 2005, Sconce 2000, Parsons and Cooper 2015). The ghost box experiment is usually performed in group situations, where the participants collectively ask questions, listen and interpret the alleged supernatural responses. Instead, the *Estes Method* version involves a complete isolation of the person in charge of the listening. The investigator acting as ‘receiver’ is blindfolded and wears noise cancelling headphones, to minimise the biases and influences of external stimuli. The *Hellier* crew explains that a successful session occurs when the participants get “some compelling responses back and forth, conversationally” (Hellier 2019): the sensation of conversation is therefore what brings the sensation of the presence of an intentional agency behind an otherwise random succession of words.

The fundamental aim of such experiments in *Hellier* is to obtain a sense of communication. This is a strong point of departure from other paranormal investigation documentaries, where technology is most often used as devices to capture, record and measure *evidence* of alleged supernatural presences: tools such as temperature or electromagnetism meters, audio recorders or night vision cameras are employed to capture proof of ghosts, poltergeist or extraterrestrial activity. In *Hellier*, instead, technologies are never used to demonstrate – or debunk – the existence of supernatural phenomena. Conversely, they can be seen as what McCormack calls “devices for doing atmospheric things” (McCormack 2015): “a device, by virtue of the cloud of constitutive affective relations in which it is immersed, which participates in the generation of an atmospheric sensing of something happening that can be felt” (ibid.: 91). Technologies and media are in *Hellier* the nodes of a complex and heterogeneous apparatus composed of material-discursive elements. By following Barad:

Apparatuses are not inscription devices, scientific instruments set in place before the action happens [...]. They are neither neutral probes of the natural world nor structures that deterministically impose some particular outcome. [...] [A]pparatuses are not mere static arrangements in the world, but rather apparatuses

are dynamic reconfiguring of the world, specific agential practices/intra-actions/performances through which specific exclusionary boundaries are enacted. (Barad 2003: 816)

In this sense, apparatuses are never solely descriptive but also productive of the phenomena they are supposed to be merely observing. The paranormal phenomenon is not a preexisting, external object measured by an observing subject, but it rather emerging from the agential cut produced from intra-acting agencies (Barad 2003). Therefore, the eerie question of agency emerges in the very moment the technology is employed, and the communicative attempt is set in motion.

The experiment begins: Connor is sitting blindfolded, listening to the ghost box feed and reporting out loud anything he hears through the headphones. Meanwhile, the others listen to the fragmented flow of words and onomatopoeic utterances, they ask questions and converse with each other to interpret the ‘answers’:

Greg: “some people call you a goblin. Do you like that name?”  
“GET READY.”  
“MOVING.”  
Dana: “Are you moving to the cave?”  
“THE HILLS.”  
Dana: “to the caves in the hills? Are you going to meet us there?”  
“RIGHT THERE.”  
Greg: “Up in the Flatwoods?”  
“THE PEOPLE. MOVING.” (Hellier 2019)

The resulting conversation is erratical and often obscure, with few coherent moments interspersed with more accidental words. The message allegedly conveyed through the radio feed, however, is less important than the sensation of interaction which is established by the practice itself. In fact, some of the moments that the investigators consider particularly relevant are not directly related to – or providing particular relevant information about – their case. Instead, they surprise as expressions of a synchronisation in action, a correspondence in time and space between the investigators, their physical surroundings, and the felt eerie agencies, through the creation of ‘meaningful coincidences’. During these situations, the sensation of a two-way interaction arises:

“THERE’S A COYOTE.”  
Dana: “Oh shit! [laughs]”  
[...]  
Dana: “where is the coyote?”  
“RIGHT THERE.”  
Dana: “To the left or to the right? ...Over here? [pointing at the direction]”  
“THEY’RE OVER THERE.” (Hellier 2019)

The ghost box is what Thacker (2013) defines a dark medium: a medium that “works too well”, mediating not between two points in the same reality but between “different ontological domains” (ibid: 102), a *portal* in which “a media object [...] serves as a passageway or conduit between the natural and supernatural” (ibid: 131). However, through the affective experiment set up in motion by the group, the natural and the supernatural ends of the communication channel stop being separated by an absolute ontological opposition, and become instead the

two extremes of an oscillatory continuum between the ordinary, everyday space of Hellier and the invisible world traced by eerie agencies felt as affective intensities. Connor, unaware of what is happening around him, reports words and fragments of sentences emerging as interferences from the radio background noise. Random happenings are charged with agency and intentionality by contingent relationalities emerging from the counterpoint between Connor's flow of fragmented sentences and the questions asked by the other investigators:

“And I felt...like we were definitely tapping into something more than just, you know, the coincidence of a word coming up in relation to what we were doing at that moment in time. It seemed stranger than that. It seemed more in touch. There was an alignment happening [...]” (Hellier 2019)

The technological apparatuses used in paranormal investigations “have a ‘force-field’ that is given by the context in which they are employed” (Espirito Santo and Barcelò 2021:12), which creates a different “attentiveness” (ibid.). And this attentiveness is focused, in the case of *Hellier*, towards the emergent, synchronistic relationships that seemingly occur between the radio feed and the sonic events happening in the surrounding of the experiment. While listening to the words channeled by Connor, the other investigators strongly raise their focus towards the sonic world they are immersed into. The subtlest noise happening around them, overheard in an everyday situation, become here of crucial importance. But what captures the investigators' attention is not so much the noises in themselves – the objective morphology of the sounds which is the focus of the Schaeffer's *écouter* listening mode – but rather the way the dynamics of their happening produce the sensation of a communication in place:

“we were hearing wood knocks that [were] seemingly communicating with us. [...] There were a lot of noises that we tried our best to kind of rule out as natural, animal noises. [...] they felt a little too pointed” (Hellier 2019)

The sounds happening around them are normal sounds in a natural environment – cracking wood, the sounds of leaves and branches moved by the wind, animal cries, and so on – and the words coming out from the ghost box are indeed random interferences of what is effectively a malfunctioning radio. The sounds do not make the paranormal *appear* as ontologically present; they reveal a contingent development which seems to point at the existence of a communicative interaction at work, with a source which is neither absent nor present. The experience of the paranormal therefore emerges as the registering of a causal connection of a *different* kind, a “divining cause” (Ramey 2014: 41), “a kind of immanent reason for contingency” (ibid.) which is not “subjective but involves an objectively uncanny dimension of the real” (ibid.). This relationality, which also echoes the acausal connecting principle of the Jungian synchronicity (Jung 2013 [1952]), imbues the sounds with agency and intentionality, and the noises from the woods become the “audible manifestation of relations and interactions” (Di Scipio 2014:12). The sensation of the eerie thus emerges as a question of agency, in which the investigators feel intentionality where there should not be: not (yet) a full presence but a “failure of absence” (Fisher 2017: 61). Another ‘dark mediation’ thus occurs, with sound not only mediating between the ordinary world of the cabin in Eastern Kentucky and the paranormal hidden within the woods, but also between the two different domains of the material – the physical, experiential dimension of being in the place and interacting with it – and the narrative – the story of their case and the lore of the place they are exploring. Therefore, the story of the Kentucky goblins – coming out from abandoned mines to disturb the locals with noises in the night – is not only ostensibly re-enacted through the messages coming from the ghost box,

but it assumes a material, ecological and ultimately interactive form through affective, sonorous relationalities.

### **Sound as communication tool with the paranormal**

As seen above, sonic events intervene as the hint of a ‘dark’ (Thacker 2013) communicative process at work between the investigators performing some experiment and the potential agencies hidden within the surrounding environment. Sound has a crucial role in all the experiments performed throughout the episodes, and it is fundamentally the cornerstone of the perceptual dimension of the whole investigation. However, sound in *Hellier* is not only something *happening*, a passive encounter that is charged, through the processes highlighted above, with the potential of the paranormal, but it is also employed as active tool to trigger the *activity* of the place. Towards the end of the second season, the investigators are preparing for a last communication ritual to be performed in a cave. During the preparation period, Dana, Greg and Tyler channel a particularly clear message from an *Estes Method* session: they repeatedly hear three distinctive “tones” – three pitches in a descending major triad – and what they interpret as the instructions to use such sounds as vibrations, to open “a way through” (Hellier 2019) in the “space between” (ibid.):

“And we have to like either...make something that will play those sounds...at a certain point I thought that we were supposed to play the sounds all at once [...] And it’ll help open something. Vibrationally.” (ibid.)

This inspires the investigators to use the channeled tones as integral part of the ritual they are designing:

“we need to actually make this cave into a giant instrument for the ritual. [...] So we need to play the tones, [...] and see what happens.” (ibid.)

In the last episode the ritual is performed. Here, Connor begins to play the notes from a laptop connected to a portable loudspeaker, diffusing the sound in the cave for about half an hour. While this operation does not seem to have any clearly visible consequence, it provokes very strong reactions on all the participants, creating a shared atmosphere which seems to affect everyone. Some say that the tones made them “a little bit uneasy” (ibid.), “made me sick” (ibid.), or that “I hated the tones. They made me so anxious” (ibid.). All this combined with bodily sensations of dizziness and feeling of ‘vibrating’ or ‘wobbling’: the metaphorical ‘vibe’ felt at the beginning of the investigation re-emerges here as bodily sensation, through a physical feedback interaction between the cave’s natural resonances and Connor’s electronic tones. And this affective feedback produces another, emotional resonance which is considered by the participants as *the* ultimate experience of their investigation:

“It was really emotional for me to do that...it was...I don’t know, it seems silly to say but I felt it happen. Whatever “it” was, I felt it happen. And it was there and I felt it and I was getting really emotional about it [...] I could feel...I don’t know, I was shaking, I was literally shaking” (ibid.)

Once again, it can be seen how the experiences in *Hellier* are not encounters with entities but rather affective movements, happenings which are at the same time subjective and external, material and emotional:

“An atmospheric fill buzzes with the resonance of nascent forms quickening or sloughing off, materialities pressing into the expressivity of something coming into existence.” (Stewart 2011: 446).

In other words, what is enlivened through the sonic eerie is not so much the goblins as entities, but rather the experience of a contact with such agencies. Moreover, the experience of the paranormal is rarely a mere spontaneous, passive encounter: the supernatural agency is not something with which they simply ‘stumble’ upon, it is instead an intensity which emerges from attunement processes, from tunings with affective resonances before representations and narrativisation.

## **Conclusions**

The attempt of this study was to conduct an analysis which did not aim “to seek out ultimate causes or foundational agencies, [...] to establish the ‘truth’ of this or that strange event, but [...] instead trace their mobile emergence in order enliven our senses to the movement of the new and new movements.” (Holloway 2017: 35). By tracing the material-discursive dynamics of the sonic in the *Hellier* series, this paper has highlighted the processuality inherent to the paranormal experience, and the methodology by which the investigators in the documentary sense the eerie through affective and atmospheric relationalities with the explored places. The process is not one of immediate, disruptive encounter with the supernatural, but it gradually develops as a progressive unsettling of the everyday environment, gradually charging it with the potential of the paranormal.

The process begins with the investigators’ acknowledgement of the atmosphere of the place, the feeling of a ‘weird vibe’ which stands as a hint of the crossing of the boundaries of the everyday territory. Then, a focused attentiveness on listening, understood as the realisation of the mutual ecological relationalities happening at a non-visual level between the investigators and the surrounding environment, allows for an affective attunement to such atmosphere. This triggers the sensation of the eerie, as a question of the potential presence of invisible, supernatural agencies at work in the place. The next step is therefore the establishment of a communication channel to attempt a bidirectional interaction with such agencies. The *Hellier* crew does this using a specific version of the ghost box experiment, a practice entirely centered around listening and auditory interactions through the medium of a radio. Finally, the sensation of the paranormal is further amplified and catalysed by physically projecting sound in the place, to activate the physical and discursive resonances of the environment, connecting place, lore and experience at an affective, pre-representational level.

In most paranormal documentaries the adopted methodology requires to produce hard evidence which would demonstrate the objectivity of inexplicable events happened *out there* – by measuring potential temperature changes, electromagnetic oscillations or sound events, recorded through the means of various technological equipment. In *Hellier*, instead, what is registered are feelings, ambiguous sensations, ‘vibes’, which are always relational, two-way, always at the same time happening inside and outside. In other words, when the investigators in *Hellier* set up technologies and instruments it is never to measure an objective, separate event, but to experience a phenomenon emerging from “a specific intra-action of an ‘object’ and the ‘measuring agencies’” (Barad 2007: 128), in which “determinate entities emerge from their intra-action” (145).

Moreover, the practices portrayed in *Hellier* are not only directed towards the ostensive re-enactment of a story of goblin-like creatures coming out from the abandoned mines in Eastern Kentucky. What the researchers are chasing is almost the experience of the paranormal investigation itself, the following of the footsteps of their models' books, such as the already mentioned John Keel:

“from the start I’ve compared this case to the Mothman Prophecies story [...]. It’s a story that I’ve always kind of held close to me. Like, it’s such a bizarre case that I think anyone who’s fascinated by this High Strangeness would read that book and say, like, [...] ‘where’s my story that I can get lost in that weirdness and have these encounters, one after another, that just blow the mind.’” (Hellier 2019)

These encounters, in *Hellier*, are affective sensations of agency, eerie ambiguous phenomena which are never seen but always felt as vibrations and sounds, and which they take, from time to time, the shape of goblin’s tricksterish noises, of whispers of natural spirits, of chants of conspiratorial cults, of voices of mythological alien entities, and more. Sometimes it is something which moves hidden from sight while deliberately making itself heard. Some other times the phenomenon is just a pure communication, an a-signifying signal in the background noise of ordinary reality. Sometimes it is the synchronistic connection with random events in the surroundings.

At the end of the first season, the investigators feel discouraged and overwhelmed by the mercuriality of their ungraspable object of research: even then sometime struggle at the constant lack of physical evidence. They therefore consult John L. Tenney, veteran paranormal researcher which act as sort of a mentor throughout the series. He tells them:

“[...] as much as we have kind of singular goals to whether it’s find out if a ghost is in a place, or if a UFO sighting happened, or if there’s goblins or if there’s elves, we all, [...] at a base level, understand that it’s not about solving that mystery, [...] all these experiences that we have are in essence just to reinforce the fact that these experiences happen” (Hellier 2019)

When observed from the point of view of experience instead of evidence – or, as said at the beginning, of the *how* instead of the *why* – the question whether the happenings portrayed in *Hellier* are real or not somehow loses its seemingly insurmountable importance: by staying true to the approach taught by *Hellier*, in fact, the experience can be considered real “through [its] disclosures and affects” (Holloway 2017: 35). Moreover, and more importantly, its irreducibility demonstrates the constructive, creative potential of paranormal practices which, by bringing to the foreground and transforming the marginal, the liminal and the transitional, it manifests “the potential for shifting and ever-new conjunctions” (ibid.) happening in “a playful portent of irreducible becoming” (ibid.). By recurring once again to an agential realist approach, it can be said that “realness does not necessarily imply “thingness”: what’s real may not be an essence, an entity, or an independently existing object with inherent attributes” (Barad 2006: 56). Therefore, and to conclude, what the *atmospheric forteanism* of *Hellier* can demonstrate is a way to interact and build relationalities between things, spaces and entities – human, non-human and super-natural ones – in “a space in which to clear the opposition between representation and reality” (Stewart 2011: 452), a field of agency which exist in-between taken for granted dualisms and oppositions.





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