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Postprint / Postprint

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

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Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Edensor, T. (2008). Mundane hauntings: commuting through the phantasmagoric working-class spaces of Manchester, England. *Cultural Geographies*, 15(3), 313-333. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474474008091330>

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Mundane hauntings: commuting through the phantasmagoric working-class spaces of Manchester, England

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This paper explores the haunted realms of everyday mundane space. Based on the author's journey to work by car, a series of sites that evoke an absent-presence of working-class life are depicted. It is argued that these spaces, including housing estates, old railways, patches of derelict ground and old cinemas, are replete with ghostly effects. Drawing upon the examples provided, the article goes on to examine in more detail these hauntings, focusing upon the sensual, half-recognizable and imaginary qualities that are provoked by absences, vestiges and peculiar recontextualizations. It is contended that such sites are particularly haunted because unlike the more dynamic spaces of regenerated urban space, the past lingers in people, spaces, textures and things and is not so rapidly disposed. The paper concludes by investigating the ambiguities produced by the ghostly absent-presence of the working class, both in lived space and in academic discourse, and evaluates the advantages of spectral indeterminacy.

Keywords: haunting • inarticulacy • intangibility • mundane space • working class

Introduction

The speed of social and spatial change throughout the twentieth century means that the contemporary era is the site of numerous hauntings, for the erasure of the past in the quest for the ever-new is usually only partial. Modern imperatives to swiftly bury the past produce cities that are haunted by that which has been consigned to irrelevance. Accordingly, the contemporary city is a palimpsest composed of different temporal elements, featuring signs, objects and vaguer traces that rebuke the tendencies to move on and forget. The urban fabric retains traces of failed plans, visionary projects, and sites of collective endeavour and pleasure that have been superseded by more modish projects. Currently, urban regeneration strategies and the production of place-images inimical to anything other than a carefully manufactured past promote cities as 'cutting edge'. Furiously reinventing itself, the city of Manchester, in its quest to attract investment, shoppers, middle-class residents and tourists, has marketed its new leisure and consumption spaces, chic city centre accommodation,

'lifestyle' facilities and its 'cool' image.¹ Swathes of former manufacturing space and lower-class housing have been converted into luxury apartments, offices and retail outlets. Scrubbed clean and imbued with design features, the industrial and class histories of such sites are effaced. However, processes of urban renovation are only partial in their attempts to erase and commodify the past. Regeneration is uneven, and outside the city centre and areas of flagship development, change occurs at a slower pace. Traces of the past linger in mundane spaces by the side of the road to renewal, haunting the idealistic visions of planners, promoters and entrepreneurs.

In these unspectacular realms, as Michel de Certeau and Luce Giard observe, 'the debris of shipwrecked histories still today raise up the ruins of an unknown, strange city. They burst forth... like slips of the tongue from an unknown, perhaps unconscious, language'.² Such intrusions reveal the powerful affective, sensual and imaginative effects of such vestiges, which, like the figure of the ghost, are amorphous and slippery. Using photographs of a series of sites to which I am drawn on my daily journey to work, I highlight these inarticulate traces of a mundane, spectral Manchester.

I have written elsewhere that commuting can be considered as an unheralded occasion of enjoyment rather than a quotidian routine suffused with boredom and tedium. Travelling alone to work from Manchester, down the M6 towards Stoke on Trent, I enjoyed the opportunity for relaxation, radio chat and music, the sensual pleasures of driving, but also unexpected sights as well as the regular, reassuring fixtures on the journey.³ My present commuting route takes me from the suburbs into Central Manchester and although of much shorter duration and undertaken at slower speed, it is similarly replete with scenes that have become familiar. It is a mundane, unspectacular journey, passing through neither city-centre nor heritage district, but through middle-class suburbia, working-class terraced housing and an inter-war council housing estate, a realm sprinkled with everyday shops, post offices, libraries, vernacular architecture, pubs and parks.

In focusing upon this regular commute rather than the central and spectacular sites of the city, I want to reinscribe the significance of everyday urban space, that habitual realm within which most urban dwellers carry out quotidian practices associated with dwelling, working and leisure. I also want to emphasize the mundanecity of haunting, which arises through both banal and spectacular processes of urban change and production of obsolescence. For most accounts of haunting focus upon either marginal, interstitial sites – as with my own accounts of spectral ruins⁴ – or places that are commonly associated with ghostliness, including cities such as London and New Orleans,⁵ old country estates, ancient houses, sites of death such as battlefields or murder scenes, and cemeteries. This focus on the spectacular diminishes the ubiquity of haunting, for as Michel de Certeau emphasizes, '(H)aunted places are the only ones people can live in',⁶ confirming that haunting is part of dwelling and being in place. As far as I am aware, the sites considered here are not associated with violent deaths or crimes. Moreover, while ghosts may often be unsettling and scary, they can also be 'rooted, friendly and affirming',⁷ embedded in familiar, lingering fixtures and features that provoke a homely recognition of that which was supposedly over and done with. As Moran notes, the outdated furnishings, ornaments, shops and designs of mundane space embody 'the outmoded habits and lifestyle choices of the recent past'. And such ubiquitous remnants 'become aspects of a shared history of the everyday'.⁸ Moreover, 'the transience of unacknowledged lives', the

traces of ‘old habits and dead routines’⁹ pervade everyday space, and can be etched onto its material fabric, with archaic graffiti and the traces of former uses. Like all space, cities ‘must be summoned up as temporary placements of ever moving material and immanent geographies, as “hauntings” of things that have moved on but left their mark’,¹⁰ in their mundane realms as well as sites of dynamic activity and change. The city endlessly moves on, but in so doing leaves behind traces of previous material forms, cultural practices, inhabitants, politics, ways of thinking and being, and modes of experience. In this account, these residues summon up the ghosts of a working-class Manchester.

Roadside hauntings

I now discuss the alluring, ghostly sites I am drawn to as I make my journey to work.

Cine city

At the second major set of traffic lights en route to work, I make a short cut and go down the road next to Cine City in Withington. This now disused cinema formerly served as the local fleapit, and latterly attracted a specialist audience, primarily consisting of students, for art and cult films. The cinema has been a victim of the arrival of a multiplex facility less than two miles away. Although closed in July 2001 and currently in poor condition, Cine City retains an air of faded grandeur. Inside there are apparently several intact original features including gold brocade seats, wall freezes, cornices and ceiling roses. Formerly known as the Scala, the cinema opened its doors in 1912, and would have been well-placed to accommodate the enormous



demand for film-viewing in an era of mass cinema going. It has experienced numerous changes of ownership and décor, and suffered bomb damage in World War II, yet for almost 90 years Cine City served local film fans, an enduring fixture around which weekly tasks and rituals were composed and repeated. Cinemas are places in which personal and communal experience meld, fostering an intimacy in the midst of collective experience.¹¹ A collective immersion in emotion and the sensual apprehension of atmosphere (darkness, a silent audience and plush seating) co-exists with the detached fantasies of individual viewers. Shared convivialities coincide with private desires. Place becomes transformed as a hubbub of movie-goers at matinees and evening screenings energize a previously quiescent domain. At the front of the building is a bay bordered by old iron railings and posts. Covered in crumbling tarmac through which old cobblestones are emerging, this vestige of an old road perhaps provided a safe space where crowds could assemble or a site at which cinema-goers were deposited by vehicle or coach.



As the building slips into desuetude its ability to haunt grows stronger. Successive layers of the building peel away to reveal former textures. Cine City's increasingly dilapidated state evokes its slow passing and provides a contrast to the shiny fantasy palace which formerly attracted cinema-goers. On the façade, part of the cladding has crumbled away to reveal an obscure notice whose lettering evokes former styles of advertising and lures us into a vanished world of mass entertainment.

Railway

Shortly after passing Cine-City, the road passes through inter-war suburban housing before going over a bridge across what used to be the South Manchester, or Fallowfield, Loop Line.

The Line was opened in 1892 and provided regular passenger services, particularly for workers who commuted to industrial and clerical jobs in the city centre until 1958. They would arrive at the old Central Station which has become Manchester Central, a large exhibition space.¹² The railway was primarily used for freight transport and linked with local canals but this function also ceased in 1988, when the line was closed. This small section of the former railway is connected to the larger spectral network of which it was part, the bridges, tunnels, stations, depots, suburbs and warehouses that connected places and people. The physical infrastructure of embankments and fencing still exists for most of the railway's eight miles, and although some housing development has erased its configurations, it is not difficult to imagine the previous scene. The route is now used as a cycle path and is also



frequently patronized by groups of mounted police for training, slower mobile forms in contrast with the speeding trains of yesterday. It retains value as a wildlife corridor and links up parks and other green spaces across the city.

The silence and emptiness of this extant route, its surrounding foliage muffling the sound of the city, conjures up the racket of passing trains, the screech of engines and horns, passing at speed to and from Central Manchester. The line was a conduit through which people, goods and materials, money and ideas flowed, a channel which would have been adorned with engine oil and littered with debris, and the noise of its passing trains would have marked time in the schedules and routines of railside inhabitants. This energy, noise and movement is summoned by the surrounding tranquillity, and the stilled networks, now cut off from urban flows, have been replaced by other routes through which matter and energy course.

Space of green

Immediately after the railway bridge, I arrive at a junction to a dual carriageway, and facing me, is a curious piece of land used for indeterminate purposes. A small entry in the corner of a wall leads to a patch of long grass and a few trees, and a footpath cuts through the centre, leading to a small, modern housing estate. This acre of land announces itself by its apparent purposelessness in a landscape in which everything else possesses a function – housing, shops, road, pavement, verges and green areas. Contemporary tendencies to fill in or make space productive render realms such as this enigmatic. Like ruins, wastelands, sidings, attics and dumps, such places rebuke attempts to plan and produce urban seamlessness. They are the largely unnoticed but typical sites which reveal that '(T)he concrete matter of the city will always exceed the ambition and attempts to control and shape it, and will always have features that cannot be exposed in the representations that planning has to work with'.¹³



Accordingly, the space opens itself to speculation. What is its history? Did something else once stand here? Has it been undeveloped for a reason? What practices has it accommodated?

These conjectures are further fuelled by the existence of a wooden notice board close to the entrance, now entirely devoid of any lettering or symbol. Who did it address? Did it name the site? Was it a warning not to play ball games? A notice about bylaws? The absence of any apparent inscription leaves the instruction or name open to supposition, a message from the past that now exists in a state of suspense.

Ex-council estate

I travel down the dual carriageway for 400 yards through an interwar-war council housing estate and then turn right onto a smaller road, which also runs through the estate. The semi-detached and terraced houses, influenced by suburban designs, are typical of the 1.2 million interwar municipal dwellings built for local authorities.¹⁴ They have generous front and back gardens, and are situated amidst broad verges and 'greens', with trees and wide pavements. The provision of high quality public housing to ensure that low-cost working-class accommodation surpassed the mean Victorian abodes associated with the lower orders, articulates the welfarist consensus which championed the virtues of equality, effective state management and public service. Guided by Tudor Walters standards,¹⁵ and influenced by ideas about the 'garden city', such estates were tightly managed to ensure that uniformity was maintained and tenants were forbidden from personalizing their houses. Such ideas currently seem obsolete now that the right-to-buy policies introduced by the Thatcherite government of the 1980s epitomize the privatization principles that pervade much of British life. Accordingly, most of these houses, part of the public housing stock until the 1980s, now appear to be part of the private housing market, most of them announcing individual ownership by their non-standardized décor. Whereas all houses previously possessed the same gates, windows, colour design and paving styles, these features have now been largely individualized to mark difference and distinction. Residential spaces such as this are serial and refer indexically to a larger spatiality which recurs throughout urban Britain, here the spectral realm of 'public' housing, now a shrunken sphere. Indeed, Roger Silverstone¹⁶ has argued that the British experience of modernity is now more rooted in the suburban lawn than the city centre sidewalk, and this manifestation of changed political and social mores is writ clearly on space. The ethos which engendered the building and management of estates such as these appears to be an anachronism in the context of Blairite neo-Liberalism. Whereas the estate would have embodied a partly shared identity of public housing through the similarities of its fixtures and aesthetics, it now more closely articulates the suburban tension between conformity and individual taste and status.

Yet some standardized features remain in doors, windows, roofing and brick facades. This refusal to disappear haunts attempts to personalize property, to mark it with distinction and style. Without these remnants, the customization of houses would not necessarily appear aspirational and competitive, since they would all articulate similar values.



Maine Road

After passing through the council housing estate, I drive through a dense area of late-Victorian terraced housing. On the right side of the road, the shortened roads at right angles to my route, end in a parallel road bordered with a high wooden hoarding, enclosing a vast area of barren land awaiting redevelopment as a housing estate. This was the site of Maine Road, the football stadium of Manchester City, opened in 1923 and left by the club in May 2003. The large stadium, which at one time had a capacity of 80,000, was replaced as the City ground by the City of Manchester Stadium, a showpiece structure designed to host the 2002 Commonwealth Games in North Central Manchester.

The streets around this empty space were energized by tens of thousands of people roughly every two weeks during the football season and a sense of place evolved with the area's long time association with the club. The rhythm of these streets was partially produced by this huge influx of people, with their anticipations and frustrations, producing a considerable hubbub as they seethed through the streets. On match days the mobile fast food outlets and snack bars, large police presence and programme and souvenir traders added to the animated throng. The unearthly sound of singing and chanting emanated from the ground and suffused the mood of the still area outside. After the match, again the area seethed with disappointed or exultant fans, somberly walking away or animatedly discussing victory. Fans' interaction with space was pervaded with sensation, the smells of cooking, bodies and cigarette smoke, the sounds of police vans, singing, klaxons and rattles, the tactile press of the crowd. Today derelict cafes and a large pub, now sand-blasted and converted into flats, indicate the absence of crowd and event. Football related graffiti remains etched onto several walls, along with the repainted and scrubbed walls where graffiti has been removed. The functional supporter's club has been reoccupied by a local employment agency. These traces are fragments of a larger whole, metonymic vestiges summoning up what this place used to be.¹⁷



It is not only in actual space that the ghostly presence of the stadium is still inscribed. It also lingers in televised recordings of football matches, and at the time of writing it remains an extant feature on *Google Earth*, whereas the City of Manchester Stadium features as a building site. Given the passions invoked by football, the area and stadium became a 'home', exerting a strong emotional pull on fans. They occupied regular positions on the terraces, gathered a constellation of experiences (the 'highs' and 'lows' of fandom) over time, and wove the venue into their regular match day routines to produce a topophilic landscape.¹⁸ The stadium was the locus for a multiplicity of routes and journeys, linked to a broader spatialization which incorporated favoured pubs, bus routes and spicy food in the Asian restaurant quarter of Rusholme. Maine Road was woven into an extensive, now ghostly topography in which fans unreflexively and habitually extended their embodied presence 'into "taken for granted" settings'.¹⁹ The silence of these streets now can no longer be broken by the hordes, and the local businesses are faltering.

The front line

A traffic light at a junction heralds the end of this dense area of housing. Before the university buildings begin, there is a district of churches, schools, playing fields, workshops and other institutions, separated from the terraced streets by Claremont Road. Again, the presence of professional football in the area is indicated by the streets belonging to Footballers Estate, a small, modern, housing association-run complex whose streets and closes are named after now-obscure Manchester City players from the past: Fred Tilson, San Cowan, Horace Barnes, Sammy Cookson, Tommy Browell, Jimmy McMullan. Claremont Road gained notoriety as the 'Front Line' during the riots of July 1981, one of several large uprisings across urban Britain which took the form of concerted violent protest by youths against what





they regarded as oppressive and racist policing, but were often mislabelled ‘race riots’. Now peaceable, the road was the central location in the stand off between youths and police, street battles, and looting and burning. Following the huge regeneration projects that have transformed the area, nothing commemorates these dramatic events. Yet this memory again conjures up a larger urban British topography, a decaying, divided stage upon which the schisms of the Thatcher era, and the widespread anger at mass youth unemployment, poverty, oppressive policing and racism were enacted. Although these events occurred half a century ago, the ghosts of riot and conflict are rarely quiet for long and the city is perennially haunted by fears of anarchy or unpredictable chaos. These presently lurk in worries about the potential for terrorist attack, gangs and gun crime, racial cleavage or environmental disaster.

The pub

Finally, shortly before arrival at work, I pass a public house which is sandwiched in between two large student halls of residence. Built to serve the inhabitants of the long demolished local terraced streets, the clientele of the inn has changed completely, but its contrast with the adjacent accommodation blocks foregrounds the way in which it seems out of time and place, a single vestige of what used to be. Here the pub stands out against the redevelopment of Manchester, invoking the dense environment of factories and terraced housing of which the building was part.

More spectral yet is the pub’s name, the Church Inn, because there is no longer any church with which it is associated and no ecclesiastical remnant. With its smoke-stained net curtains, wooden trimmings and faded sign, this turn-of-the-century pub conjures up an imaginary cast



of thirsty labourers and a bucolic clamour that echoes through televisual and filmic representations such as Terence Davies' *Distant voices, still lives*,²⁰ which features a pub around which community life revolves.

The ghosts of mundane space

I now develop some of the issues raised by the ghostly spaces identified above. I explore how the 'absent-presence' of the spectral makes itself known, the prevalence of haunting in mundane space, and the ways in which haunted spaces discussed here are associated with a working-class culture that has, along with the very notion of the working class, itself become somewhat ghostly. I conclude by arguing that the figure of the ghost should not be conceived as a trace of the obvious but is always a vestige of something never quite identifiable.

Mundane absent presences

Recent writers have conceived haunting as affected by the power of 'absent presences'.²¹ These absent presences saturate the fabric of the city. For instance, some buildings and objects are erased whilst others remain, constituting a constantly evolving 'temporal collage' characterized by spatial juxtapositions and a host of intersecting temporalities which 'collide and merge' in a landscape of juxtaposed 'asynchronous moments'.²² This dense urban medley of past, present and future is not part of a project to encode or theme space but is better apprehended as the 'crossing, folding, piercing'²³ of disparate elements, producing a series

of disjunctions through which the past erupts into the present. As Michel de Certeau asserts, the apparent order of urban space is 'everywhere punched and torn open by ellipses, drifts and leaks of meaning' is colonized by 'heterogeneous and even contradictory elements... [T]hings extra and other (details and excesses coming from elsewhere) insert themselves into the accepted framework, the imposed order'.²⁴ Such excessive scraps, inconsistencies, peculiarities, incongruities, traces and conspicuous absences can contribute to 'the stories and legends that haunt urban space like superfluous or additional inhabitants'²⁵ and extend the potential for reading and experiencing the city otherwise. The haunted spaces represented here evoke the multiplicity of this temporal urban collage, highlighting the varied ways in which the past haunts the presence by its absence, is everywhere folded into the fabric of the city, and especially possesses its mundane spaces. I now elucidate how the ghostly sites I identified above highlight the different ways in which absent presences manifest themselves in the city.

In some cases there is an absence so profoundly evident, that emptiness is apt to become crowded with remembered and imagined impressions of that which used to fill the absence. Here, the lack of energy and movement on the obsolete railway and the vast absence produced by the demise of Maine Road stadium, conjure up the dead and buried.

In other cases, recent additions to the landscape look out of place, have not yet blended in with their surroundings. A lack of patina and the dearth of material inscription by repetitive use over time similarly calls forth that which has been replaced, such as the cycle path that has replaced the rail track. Moreover, the incongruity of old fixtures endowed with new meaning and purpose at variance with their former significance recalls that which has been superseded. The pub close to Maine Road which teemed with football fans on match days has been sandblasted and converted into an upmarket apartment block. And there are sites where replacement of the old has not been complete, where the outdated may have been mostly obliterated but familiar features from the past remain to haunt more recent substitutes, as in the case of the old council house doors.

There are also extant elements that through their incongruity or desolation summon up the larger ghostly infrastructure to which they formerly belonged. The Church Inn conjures up the now non-existent church with which it was intimately associated and the larger working-class community which it served, a community of which it is one of the few remaining traces following the expansion of the university quarter. Similarly, the vacant cafés surrounding Maine Road invoke the crowds and vitality of the football crowd. Such vestiges act as metonyms for larger phantom environments. Well-used sites bear the scars of the hordes which regularly seethed around them. The impress of the energies and agency of people on space is found on the scrubbed walls around Maine Road, in numerous alterations made to houses, in worn out tarmac and eroded steps, in shiny hand-rails and in chewing gum spattered pavements. And there are those locations that are so strongly associated with dramatic historical events that their contemporary quiescence raises their spectres. The present serenity of Claremont Road remembers the volatile ferment of the riots that occurred there.

Finally, there are those absences that are enigmatic, signs which call up an unimaginable absence. The regenerating city is full of sites and fixtures that cannot be squeezed into redevelopment and zoning schemes. Inscrutable, they haunt functionalist desires with their lack of purpose or clear origin, as in the case of the space of green with its obscure sign. The

meanings and purposes of these numerous sites might be discerned through historical research, yet to bring spaces into classification is only to partially exorcise their ghosts, for the erasures perpetrated are rarely seamless and the buried is always apt to erupt at different times and places. In fact, *not finding out* is part of the methodology of confronting ghosts, it allows the spectral to continue haunting without exorcism.

The ghostliness of mundane space

It is in the rather mundane spaces of the city that the ghosts of the city are particularly insistent. Such realms, usually conceived as repetitive domains in which people carry out everyday routines, habits and unreflexive practices, are characterized by a circadian rhythm that appears to be separate from historical processes. People shop, do housework and gardening, chat on the street and go drinking in the local pub, endlessly reconstituting the rhythms of domesticity, rhythms that contrast with the dynamic processes taking place in city centres. It is partly this repetition which makes such realms ghostly, for cultural continuities are embodied in the historical practices of present inhabitants, echoing the activities and dispositions of their predecessors. These regular practices become sedimented in neighbourhoods and are often physically inscribed on place for they continually reproduce shared routines, common route-ways, and times and places of synchronic activity. Accordingly, through repetition, such habitual endeavours 'conjure up the reality of collective ageing and decay even within the repetitive, cyclical experiences of the everyday'.²⁶

The spirits of continuity do not, however, deny that space inevitably and continuously changes. It is that such change occurs at a different pulse, seeps in more gradually. Adaptations to change tend to be less totalizing in their transformations. Whereas typically, the rapid redevelopment of city centres systematically effaces even recent historical traces, in these mundane spaces, the past is less likely to be entirely disposed of, polished away or obliterated. Things, buildings, people and traces hang on. That which is supposedly unfashionable or obsolete is still used, or might remain as an enduring fixture around which routines take place, a familiar, comfortable constituent. Or removal might be incomplete and unreplaced. Even where such elements are conceived of as over and done with, processes of disposal take longer and impulses to reject are less urgent, so that the rejected might linger in a state of 'unfinished disposal'.²⁷ This slower change of space means that residents who have lived there for a long time are continually confronted by that which used to be. These disappeared and partially intact features are moorings through which people gain a sense of place over time, as any oral reminiscence project will illuminate.

Joe Moran asserts that 'the invisibility of the everyday means that the memories it evokes are likely to be fragmentary and elusive',²⁸ though no less powerful for that. The only partially recognizable evocations that haunt mundane space are grounded in familiar experience, and whether we dwell there or not, they depend upon a habituated, embodied, grounded, yet largely unreflexive geographical knowledge that implies a wider space composed of (different kinds of) housing estates, patches of land, institutions, atmospheres, banal fixtures and so on that have been apprehended in the past and consolidate a compendium of sensual experience. The 'knotted, intertwined threads of memory'²⁹ in the city are constituted intertextually and interspatially through reference to a host of other times and places. Accordingly,

this grounded knowledge is apt to produce an ‘inarticulate feeling of pathos experienced in commonplace environments’.³⁰

The ghosts of place are present then, in our own memories of other times and spaces, and as I have suggested elsewhere,³¹ these are not deliberately sought recollections but involuntary memories which emerge to rekindle the past through unexpected confrontations with sights, sounds, smells and atmospheres. Such surprising evocations might be stimulated by a ‘variety of substances and perspectives’, by ‘lights, colours, vegetation, heat, air, slender explosions of noises... passages, gestures’, all only ‘half-identifiable’.³² In mundane spaces these stimuli lurk in the textures of walls, in the cobwebs on privet hedges, the noise of a car turning a corner, in the qualities of vegetation on marginal land, down alleyways, in chalk marks on the pavement and in the vernacular décor of houses and gardens. Crucially, as Walter Benjamin insists, ‘only what has not been experienced explicitly and consciously, what has not happened to the subject as an experience, can become a component of *memoire involuntaire*’.³³ Such memories contrast with recorded memories, which are organized and stored individually or collectively commemorated, for they are uncategorizable, precisely because they never were subject to deliberate compilation.

These often indefinable sensations produce an ‘obscure awareness’ which ‘confers on childhood memories a quality that makes them at once as evanescent and as alluringly tormenting as half-forgotten dreams’.³⁴ For such memories emerge through the sensual ‘intertwining of objects with the non-rational modalities of emotion and affect’,³⁵ affective intensities which evade the ‘cultural vocabularies’ of ‘theories of signification that are wedded to structure’,³⁶ and emerge out of suddenly sensed relationalities with things and spaces that are often beyond representation. But the ghostly, involuntary memories stimulated by place also reside in experiences beyond childhood, in rooms we have lived in, sites we worked in, places we have visited and things we have handled. As de Certeau and Giard remark, our ‘successive living spaces never disappear completely; we leave them without leaving them because they live in turn, invisible and present, in our memories and in our dreams. They journey with us’.³⁷ And they are apt to emerge in contact with other places.

It is not only contact with space that stimulates the intense, blurry recollections of other times and places but also the stories that we have heard from others, the tales grandparents and parents relate, and the photographs they have shown us. No less powerful are memories mediated by television, film, fiction and art. Contemporary processes of social remembering have been described as becoming increasingly externalized, staged outside the local through the intensified mediatization and commodification of popular sites, myths and icons.³⁸ Mediated imaginary geographies circulate through adverts, soap operas, ‘classic’ rock music stations and remade ‘classic’ movies and are consumed largely in mundane environments. Yet rather than only being conceived of as prompting detached, spectacular experiences, mediated nostalgia is as likely to inform the visual apprehension and sensual feel of particular kinds of space.

There is then, a sort of layered haunting through which far distant times, never directly experienced but nevertheless powerful, return in popular cultural representations, and in heritage presentations and school lessons, but also in the stories told by parents and grandparents, in dreams and in peculiar intimations. And yet these seemingly far-away times are never quite as distant from more recent eras, for their residues remain in peoples’ bodies, habits and manners, and in

the material infrastructure of space. The mid-1960s, when I was small, were equidistant from the present day and the 1920s. The lingering fashions from that earlier era and succeeding decades, the stories and experiences of many relatives and neighbours, were still resonant, still possessed the memories, styles, tastes and cultural frameworks of my childhood realm.

The ghosts of class

Upon reflection, after these places, peculiarly charged with an absent presence, had impressed themselves upon me, it became clear that part of what I was being largely haunted by was a ghostly working class: working-class cinema-goers, residents, train passengers, rioters, football fans and drinkers. These traces suggest that previously, a distinct and distinguishable class was indisputably imprinted on space. And this ghostly absence reverberates in the quiescence of privatized housing estates and vacant lots, and in the gaps and faint traces of former life.

Roger Bromley maintains that 'class has become the ghost in the machine of contemporary British politics, the great "unspoken"'.³⁹ Most evidently, a working-class spectre haunts the (New) Labour Party, and its revised conceptions of welfare, public service and 'community', and also cultural spheres such as football, pop music and popular cinema, which have been adopted by new middle-class fractions as sources of expertise and identity.⁴⁰ There is discomfort with the reifications of old working-class culture and the disappointment over failed collective dreams.⁴¹ And academic, abstract conceptions of class become ever more evanescent as attempts to produce convincing definitions are marked by widely varying criteria.⁴²

It is, of course, not that there is no British working class any more, but that this is fragmented, marginalized and isolated.⁴³ It is likely to incorporate asylum seekers and migrants, poor drug addicts, single parents, homeless people, and the perennially unemployed and sick, none of whom any longer have a wellspring of working-class institutional and social assistance and solidarity to tap into. A distorted reflection of contemporary working-class identity is also articulated by a recent imaginary of 'chavs', hen-parties, 'trailer trash' and monstrous, excessive behaviour which provides the 'constitutive limit' of respectable behaviour.⁴⁴ This representation does not evoke the respectable, thrifty, hard-working and supportive imagined working-class community but its decadent, unrespectable other side. In this former conception, the working class is imagined as a community forged by shared hardships, characterized by crowded streets and houses and physical closeness, with respectability manifest in church attendance, pride in skilled work and thrift, neighbourly pubs, corner shops, street games, communal leisure, mutual help and unlocked doors. Joanne Bourke⁴⁵ argues that these idealized constructions of worthiness are produced out of leftist visions which bask in a romantic glow of shared communal values and unrealistic socialist futures. This misconceives working-class identity as grounded in everyday life and practical politics rather than produced by structural conditions, and it ignores the violence, gangs, nosiness, prejudices and exclusions, and status-driven moral judgements which also typified working-class domains. She further claims that a shared working-class identity associated with place 'could not surmount the difficulties inherent in a competitive society'⁴⁶ and rather than the nostalgic 'retrospective construction' of political commentators, is better understood as grounded in flexible and contingent responses to circumstances under conditions of limited resources and opportunities.

Mike Savage concurs that the British working class has never been a homogeneous, united mass but cleaved by numerous regional, gendered, ethnic and industrial differences. Yet he also intriguingly maintains that the very idea of the working class ‘served as a moral identifier for much of the twentieth century’ which was oriented around the virtues of independence, skill, respectability, solidarity and community.⁴⁷ Despite its idealism, this moral identifier continues to haunt a more confused and confusing era with its appeal to stability, solidarity and conviviality and produces a sense of loss and nostalgia for unrealized possibilities and ‘community’. Besides this imaginary function, however, the working-class community also possessed a spatial significance. Restricted mobility and an enduring core of long-term residents characterized many working-class spaces for good or ill, so that they were clearly identifiable, physical communities, in the form, for instance, of interwar public estates and dense terraced housing.

Although as I have mentioned, Bromley identifies the absence of discussions about class in politics, he nevertheless goes on to argue that it remains alive in British film. In a mediatised age, the recognizable working class are not so quickly consigned to the grave for they live on in recycled kitchen sink films from the 1960s, British nostalgic televisual compilations and in archival footage from yesteryear, such as the curiously affecting *Lost world of Mitchell and Kenyon*.⁴⁸ Moreover, the working class is continually rhetorically and stylistically alluded to in contemporary television programmes such as *Coronation street*, *Eastenders* and the *Royle family*, so that fictional identities carry traces of that which is no longer physically present in space on any large scale. In addition, our own memories intersect with these mediated representations, and here, I want to make clear how I am personally haunted. I spent my earliest years on an inter-war council estate similar to the one depicted above, worked in several factories in early adulthood, and delivered letters to terraced houses when working as a postman. The sensual memories of these times linger and they are energized by contact with places that are redolent of these earlier experiences. In addition to the clear absent presences evident in mundane space, these individual memories and mediatised effects contribute to the phantasmagoric experience of cities⁴⁹ which encompasses the powerful ways in which people imagine, dream and desire the city in ways that detach the city from immediately tangible experience. There is a phantasmagoric working class that haunts the spaces I travel through daily.

Intangible and elusive hauntings

The ghosts of the working class, like other phantoms, reside in space, in mediatised forms, and in sensual recollections and while never entirely imagined, neither are these spectral forms available for mental reconstruction and authoritative representation. Like all ghosts, they are indistinct, half-recognizable, ephemeral entities. I can’t really ‘know’ what it was like to sit in a packed cinema audience in 1915, travel on a busy commuter train in the 1930s, participate in a riot or drink in a pub at the turn of the nineteenth century and although I have a sensual apprehension of what it was like to live in an interwar council housing estate and attend football matches at Maine Road, even these impressions are patchy and partial. Yet the haunting effects of these vestiges in places and things are the unexpected intrusions which ‘spring to life unbidden, and serve as ghostly sentinels of our thought’.⁵⁰ In this sense, memory cannot be static but is characterized by discontinuities and irruptions, and is ‘fragmented and dispersed across these unnoticed routines and contingent moments’⁵¹ in elusive sensations of past evoked in place.

Fluid and evanescent experiences of the spectral disturb the reifications through which performances, narratives and experiences of memory become fixed in space by those with concerns to settle accounts with the past. As de Certeau and Giard declare, dominant strategies of remembering tend to exorcise haunted places and as for the ghost, '[I]ts strangeness is converted into legitimacy'.⁵² In official sites of memory, in conservation areas, museums and monumental landscapes, and in the commodified nostalgia of shops and heritage tourism, classified artefacts and authoritative accounts inscribe selective versions about the way things were. Yet even at these sites, the excessive material, sensual, semiotic and epistemological effects of words, places and things escapes attempts to stabilize memory. However, in the mundane spaces I have describe above, unlike certain areas of the city – the heritage district, the retail hub, the administrative complex and the tourist attraction – ghosts are more freely able to haunt, for the regulatory processes that hold sway are less concerned with where and how things, activities and people should be placed. Development tends to be less overdetermined by grand aesthetic plans which fill in the disruptive and empty spaces that threaten visions of the successful and dynamic city of the future. And so patches of underdetermined land, architectural vestiges, stray objects and outmoded signs endure.

It is unsurprising that in an era typified by rapid change, in which so many spatial and social uncertainties emerge and everything that is solid turns to air, that there is a tendency to search for homeliness in the world. Vidler⁵³ argues that a sense of the uncanny is part and parcel of modernity, and that while the rootlessness and continual change that pervades modern experience shatters enduring spatial stability, it also makes it desirable. The nostalgic tendencies of the contemporary are apt to conjure up ghosts, stimulating a deep sense of loss for an imagined, idealized past.⁵⁴ However, ghosts are too unruly to simply satiate these desires for imagined wholeness. They are far from pliant entities ready to satisfy nostalgic longings. Ghosts are not 'entities that existed in the past, compartmentalized and ready to be claimed',⁵⁵ manifestations of self-evident identities that may support claims of the present. In this sense, though the ghosts featured above possess us with a working-class spirit, they can only ever suggest a faint understanding, are only ever indistinct and allusive. They reside in the 'marginal geography of the Exterior, beyond the limit of the thinkable',⁵⁶ that which is simultaneously far away and close at hand.

It is in this vaguely recognizable but elusive form that haunted spaces supply that 'peculiar commingling of the familiar and unfamiliar'⁵⁷ that constitutes the uncanny. The ghost elusively conjures up a half-recognizable world through the empathetic contact it makes, but at the same time it provokes a sense of the ineffable and mysterious which is unavailable to representational fixing. The insubstantial familiarity and homeliness of working-class space cajoles conjectures, fuzzy memories and lost sensations, but is also – like other haunted realms – characterized by 'its very inexplicability'.⁵⁸ In addition, the sudden force of the remembered but enigmatic sensation or atmosphere rockets the past into the present, or conjures up an unidentifiable or even imaginary past. The uncanny here is also then, 'the mental space where temporality and spatiality collapse',⁵⁹ where the arrested decay and potted, linear accounts of regulated sites of memory are confounded by ghostly intimations of an unfathomable past.

Modern tendencies to authoritatively represent, classify and pin down are haunted by the vague and hazy. Yet after its fracture, fragmentation and marginalization, working-class

people and spaces are characterized by an intangibility which does not, however, deny their continued existence. Representations of traces of the past are invariably confounded by the ‘unstable links between signifier and signified’.⁶⁰ Subject to constant deferral, like all signs, they are ‘haunted by a chain of overdetermined readings, mis-readings, slips and accretions’.⁶¹ Modern urban spaces are particularly suffused with a temporal ambiguity, whereby the present succeeds the past, and yet that present is saturated with illegible traces, memories and forms of hearsay from the past that continue to make their mark. And these traces are as likely to testify to the future as the present and the past, for as Jacques Derrida remarks, ‘a phantom never dies, it remains always to come and to come back’⁶² for totalizing closures of historical processes fail to consider how the past is always-already in the midst of the present. In this sense, the absent presence of an identifiable working class haunts romantic visions of the past but also those of future political programmes and assessments of the present, which complacently deny the continuing existence of a far more marginalized class. These ghosts also suggest a passing that may return in new form, with new forms of collective action, reconfigured identities and the potential for forms of conflict.

Ghosts ‘are a ubiquitous aspect of the phenomenology of place’,⁶³ ‘ineffable and quasi-mystical’ dimensions⁶⁴ which emerge in encounters with the material, the mediated, the sensual and the affectual. I have attempted to demonstrate here that these spectres are as likely to haunt mundane, everyday spaces as ancient mansions and battlegrounds. Confronting ghosts is a necessary check on grand visions and classifications that fix understandings of place, for they can provide an empathetic, sensual, impressionistic insight into the unseen energies that have created the city. As Avery Gordon puts it, being haunted draws us ‘always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as transformative recognition’.⁶⁵

Biographical note

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