

‘GHOSTING’

Contemporary Media Technologies and ‘Millennial’ Temporalities

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The man in the bed, the lover, slowly opens his eyes to the light of the room. The man standing before him seems strange, like a muddy shape, the way an unfocused figure in front of a lighted background hovers as the spectre of death. A doomed reality... The lover’s body shocks to the ceiling. A terrible thud. But this is not the lover, this is air, and the body, the lover, is gone.

– M. Kitchell, *Spiritual Instrument*¹

The one who has disappeared appears still to be there, and his apparition is not nothing. It does not do nothing

– Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*²

The definition of ‘ghosting’ was posted on *Urban Dictionary* in 2013.³ Initially an online compendium of definitions of slang, col-

1 M. Kitchell, *Spiritual Instrument* (United States: Civil Coping Mechanisms, 2015), 7-8.

2 Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), 120.

3 “Ghosting: The act of suddenly ceasing all communication with someone the subject is dating, but no longer wishes to date. This is done in hopes that the ghostee will just ‘get the hint’ and leave the subject alone, as opposed to the subject simply telling them he/she is no longer interested. Ghost-

loquialisms and contemporary idioms (that has now broadened into definitions and descriptions of anything that a contributor might desire to define), *Urban Dictionary* remains the most popular resource for the recording and grasping of an emergent ‘millennial’ lexicon. However, the bias in the this definition is apparent. To clarify let us take ‘ghosting’ to mean the following, as generally understood by those who ‘ghost’ and are ‘ghosted.’ It is indeed “the act of suddenly ceasing all communication with someone,” *usually* referring to a romantic partner (though the term can be used within the context of *any* relationship—a friend or family member for example). Instances of ghosting can range from an individual ghosting someone they have been communicating with entirely online for a short period of time (e.g. via a dating app such as Tinder) to someone they have been dating casually for some months to a long-term partner. Ghosting is generally understood to be a means of ending a relationship—however brief or long.

Initial use of the term has been traced back to 2006 to refer to the setting of statuses to “invisible” on instant messaging systems to avoid contact with particular individuals and/or the cessation of other forms of communication.⁴ Having gained greater traction since the early 2010s, numerous articles have been written about ghosting in the past few years by popular youth media outlets such as *Refinery29*, *Vice* and *The Huffington Post* confirming ghosting as something that has become entrenched in millennial dating behaviour. It was even added to the *Merriam-Webster Online*

ing is not specific to a certain gender and is closely related to the subject’s maturity and communication skills. Many attempt to justify ghosting as a way to cease dating the ghostee without hurting their feelings, but it in fact proves the subject is thinking more of themselves, as ghosting often creates more confusion for the ghostee than if the subject kindly stated how he/she feels.” Ghostface Illa, “Ghosting” in *Urban Dictionary*, posted November 27, 2013, <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Ghosting>.

⁴ Kimberly Truong, “This Super-Rude Dating Behaviour Just Got Added to the Dictionary,” *Refinery29*, last modified February 7, 2017, <https://www.refinery29.com/2017/02/139717/ghosting-official-word-dictionary?bucketed=true>.

Dictionary in 2017,⁵ and lauded by the *Collins English Dictionary* “as one of its words of 2015.”⁶ In fact, *The Huffington Post* conducted a poll on experiences of, and attitudes towards ghosting that found that those aged 18 to 29⁷ had experienced a significantly higher incidence of ghosting, being more likely to ghost or be ghosted than older age groups (or at least were most likely to *admit* to having perpetrated or experienced it).

But surely ‘millennials’ are not singular in their experience of ghosting, even if they *are* the first generation to have coined a (quasi-)neologism to refer to it? After all, lovers have been ignored and jilted without explanation throughout history. However, most discussions of ghosting do not deny the long-running history of “silent treatment” or being suddenly ignored, the plasticity of feelings and the mutable nature of desire that can at one moment render someone as potentially “the love of your life”—deserving of all attentions—and at the next, boredom incarnate. Instead, what is mentioned repeatedly is the frequency and normalisation of this current gesture of silence, which is largely blamed on contemporary media technologies that apparently enable a lack of accountability and perpetuate a culture of disposability. After all, in an age where countless romantic entanglements begin on dating apps like Tinder and Bumble, and then are largely conducted via messaging apps such as WhatsApp, romantic partners can seem not-quite-real. Virtual avatars of their lesser-spotted “IRL” (“In Real Life”) selves. Won with a “swipe,” almost like playing a video game, and dropped without explanation and without guilt, just like running over a civilian in *Grand Theft Auto*⁸ and continuing to drive

5 Ibid.

6 Susie Cohen, “Ghosting: Have Apps Like Tinder Killed Off Basic Decency when it Comes to Dating,” *The Independent*, last modified November 9, 2015, <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/love-sex/ghosting-dating-tinder-added-to-dictionary-etiquette-a6724096.html>.

7 This was the age group that was delineated, which doesn’t correspond exactly with that of millennials. Poll conducted with market research firm YouGov, with 1000 (American) interviewees, October 23-26, 2014.

8 *Grand Theft Auto* is a video game that was especially popular amongst

at full speed, without remorse or consequence.

Indeed, Zygmunt Bauman notes that virtual communications enable the swift exiting of romantic relationships. He explains that, “Eros is possessed by the ghost of Thanatos which no magic incantations can exorcise.” That is to say, love is haunted by its own death-drive. In our desperation to close the distance between ourselves and the romantic other, we always risk restricting the freedom of the object of our love⁹ and assimilating its alterity, which eventually “sounds the death-knell to love.”¹⁰ According to Bauman, we attempt to reconcile our desires for both freedom and intimacy “in the all-absorbing and all-consuming labor of ‘networking’ and ‘surfing the network.’”¹¹ He describes how, in popular lexicon, the terms “‘relating’ and ‘relationships’” have been superseded by talk of “connections, of ‘connecting’ and ‘being connected’”—a “language of ‘connectedness’” (rather than “the language of ‘relationships’”), that replaces “partners” with “networks.”¹² In contrast to *relationships*, which emphasize togetherness, it is the term *network*, Bauman tells us, that implies *both* connection and disconnection, a matrix of shifting bonds. It is this dual motion that constitutes and defines a network—“moments of ‘being in touch’ interspersed with periods of free roaming.” Furthermore, Bauman states that “connections are ‘virtual relations,’” that, contrary to concrete relationships, “are easy to enter and exit.” He quotes a man interviewed regarding online dating, (note that this was even before the advent of dating apps), who cites its one major advantage as being that “‘you can always press delete.’”¹³ *You can always press delete*, you can always stop responding, you can always ghost someone. However, Bauman stresses that this

millennials during the 1990s and 2000s. There have been various controversies regarding its supposed desensitization and incitement to violence, of children and young adults.

9 Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds* (Cambridge; Malden: Polity Press, 2011), 8.

10 Ibid., 7.

11 Ibid., 34.

12 Ibid., xi.

13 Ibid., xi-xii.

“disengagement and termination-on-demand” do not mitigate the risks of romantic relationships, but instead re-distribute them in new configurations.¹⁴

‘Ghosting’ and the Post-Human

According to popular psychologists, ghosting has now become a norm that demonstrates waning empathy and non-committal behaviour amongst millennials, and is facilitated by the apparent lack of accountability enabled by virtual communication. Indeed, one such psychologist remarks that it is deployed to foster “stable ambiguity [which] inevitably creates an atmosphere where at least one person feels lingering uncertainty.”¹⁵ However, rather than millennials actively and individually creating this ‘atmosphere’ within romantic relationships (as though they are sadistic magicians, purposeful conjurers of vagary), it is exactly this “stable ambiguity” or “lingering uncertainty” that appears to be the prevailing and pervasive *general* contemporary condition.

The approach of popular psychology is markedly anthropocentric in its privileging of the human actant as the centre, the originator or mastermind of this ambiguity, which it is implied is *merely enabled* (not directly *caused*) by contemporary media technologies. This echoes McLuhan’s claim that “electric technology” is an *extension* of Man’s “central nervous system in a global embrace”;¹⁶ in other words, a far-reaching extension of human experience and agency. Writing decades before the World Wide Web, McLuhan predicts a near-future that will constitute the “final phase of the extensions of Man...where the creative process of knowing will be collectively and corporately extended to the whole of human soci-

14 Ibid., xiii.

15 Esther Perel, “Stable Ambiguity and the Rise of Ghosting, Icing and Simmering,” *Pesi* (blog), accessed April 12, 2018, <https://www.pesi.com/blog/details/885/ask-esther-stable-ambiguity-and-the-rise-of-ghosting>.

16 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London: MIT Press, 1994), 3.

ety...[affecting] the whole psychic and social complex.”¹⁷ However, Nicholas Gane notes that throughout his body of work, McLuhan’s position “wavers between a basic humanism (placing ‘Man’ at the centre of all things) and a more radical post-human stance (human subjectivity is disappearing into the machinery of communication)” and that Kittler seizes upon this inconsistency, disparaging the humanist strand and extrapolating the post-humanist strand of McLuhan’s theory.¹⁸

Indeed, it is in considering Kittler’s “technical *a priori*,” that we can begin to understand how ghosting is one of countless phenomena that are bound to the contemporary technologies whose existence and modes of functioning they are entirely contingent upon. According to Kittler, it is the materiality and subsequent mechanical action of media technologies that form and shape culture and the social, rather than the reverse.¹⁹ He suggests that we should look to the physical architectures (or hardware) of media to be able to adequately comprehend so-called society,²⁰ as it is the former that “structures the content it processes.”²¹ Hence, the manner in which we perceive is dependent on media technologies²² due to the “structures of communication and understanding” that they construct.²³ The very *possibility* of meaning arises from the technological processes (that are themselves devoid of meaning), and so human action is also exposed as an effect of these processes.²⁴ Hence, the “technical *a priori*” refers to the *causal* power of

17 Ibid., 3-4.

18 Nicholas Gane, “Radical Post-humanism: Friedrich Kittler and the Primacy of Technology,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 22.3 (2005): 25-41, (28).

19 Ibid., 29.

20 Friedrich Kittler, *Literature, Media, Information Systems* (Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2012), 162.

21 Gane, “Radical Post-humanism,” 35.

22 Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1999), 2-3.

23 Gane, “Radical Post-humanism,” 28-29.

24 Gane, “Radical Post-humanism,” 28.

media to “determine our situation,”²⁵ including romantic (or *unromantic*) sociality. Millennial media define millennial realities,²⁶ and thus determine millennial experience.

And so the import for Man, for the human, is—as Kittler tells us—that “at the moment of merciless submission to laws whose cases we are, the phantasm of man as the creator of media vanishes.”²⁷ Instead, media technologies *create* Man, “the very idea of humanness” itself.²⁸ The human as primary agent and engineer of its own realities can instead be re-cast as the *post-human*,²⁹ which encompasses both the media technologies themselves and the human, and foregrounds their inseparability. Something as seemingly infantile as ghosting, appearing on the one hand, an all-too-human behaviour, is on the other, an effect of the functioning of these media.

The post-human can be further understood by briefly invoking the Deleuzo-Guattarian “assemblage,” which specifically refers to the shifting relations or connections between diverse elements, such that they are structured and re-structured in changing configurations.³⁰ An assemblage is “an intermingling of bodies reacting to one another,” but also “of acts and statements, of incorporeal transformations attributed to bodies.”³¹ Thus, a particular assemblage can consist of both material and immaterial, human and non-human elements. The human individual can be thought as assemblage, but even more pertinently, the relations *within* the individual possess no more significance than those that it forms with *external* elements. And so concepts of interiority and exteriority are undermined, along with the concept of the human itself. According to the logic of the assemblage then, and in line with

25 Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, xxxix.

26 Ibid., see page 3, where Kittler asserts that “media define ‘what really is.’”

27 Ibid., xli.

28 Gane, “Radical Post-humanism,” 38.

29 Ibid., 37-39.

30 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 585-587.

31 Ibid., 102-103.

Kittler’s “technical a priori,” people and their behaviours become indivisible from media technologies—all constituting elements (or interconnected groups of elements/assemblages) within the wider assemblage. As Kittler remarks, “The age of media...renders indistinguishable what is human and what is machine.”³²

Zone of Ambiguity (We’re All ‘Millennials’ Now)

But what is it specifically about the way that contemporary media technologies structure (post-)human experience which leads to ghosting? We have already discussed the lack of accountability and culture of disposability (where freedom tussles with intimacy), that are not just *enabled* but directly *determined* by, and inseparable from, contemporary media technologies. However, at the root of this culture of disposability, is the affective degradation of linear temporality that is a deep aspect of the action of these technologies.

Kittler implicitly acknowledges this when he writes of the collapsing of all previous forms of media into contemporary media, where “sound and image, voice and text are reduced to surface effects” through digitization, forcing all media to co-exist within the digital—“an endless loop” of information.³³ The import, unspoken here, is that all historical periods to which these media have given rise are condensed into an omnipotent digitality, stripping them of their specific chronological positioning. Wolfgang Ernst also notes Kittler’s attention to the “recombinant depth of the virtual,” drawing attention to the latter’s assertion that chronological linearity is being supplanted by “co-presence,”³⁴ an effect of the numerically-based “micrological temporality” of digital technologies (against the narrative-based ‘relativizations’ that comprise the

32 Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, 146.

33 Ibid., 1-2.

34 Wolfgang Ernst, “Kittler-Time: Getting to Know Other Temporal Relationships with the Assistance of Technological Media” in *Media After Kittler*, eds. Eleni Ikoniadou and Scott Wilson (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2015): 51-66, (52-53).

historical).³⁵ Pertinent here is Kittler’s associated concept of recursion, which Ernst explains according to computer science:

In computer science, recursion is precisely defined as the reapplication of a processing instruction to a variable that is itself already the (intermediary) result of the same processing instruction. The value of the variable thus changes with each running of the loop; recursion combines repetition and variation in order to bring forth something new.³⁶

Hence recursion involves the repetition of the past but metamorphosed, always with a forward impulse. It is the recombinatory, cycling motion of an “algorithmic time”³⁷ that now drives (post-) human experience.

In *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*, Mark Fisher advances his own notion of (re-)cycling temporality, examining it on the level of cultural forms. However, in contrast to Kittler and Ernst, he denies it any claim to the future. He describes “the general condition: in which life continues but time has somehow stopped,” referencing Franco Berardi’s assertion of “the slow cancellation of the future” that began in the 1970s.³⁸ Fisher writes that, “the 21st century is oppressed by a crushing sense of finitude and exhaustion,” in which “it doesn’t feel as if the 21st century has started yet.” He cites as the cause of this exhaustion of futurity the rise of rampant neoliberalism, put in place and internationally consolidated by successive political regimes, whilst technological advancements “have altered the texture of everyday experience beyond all recognition.”³⁹ Specifically, Fisher postulates that the resulting conditions of financial and social instability, have made us over-worked and over-anxious with neither the time, nor funds, for creativity. This, and our bombardment with information and inability to withdraw from constant virtual communications,

35 Ibid., 56.

36 Ibid., 60.

37 Ibid., 61-62.

38 Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (Winchester; Washington: Zero Books, 2014), 6.

39 Ibid., 8-9.

leaves us unable to produce or consume the new, to usher in the future.⁴⁰ Instead, he asserts that contemporary culture has mined past forms to the extent that we are no longer even able to recognise them as properly belonging to a particular historical period, nor do they seem adequate to the present.⁴¹ Fisher describes the current moment as “marked by its extraordinary accommodation towards the past,” such that “the very distinction between past and present is breaking down...cultural time has folded back in on itself, and the impression of linear development has given way to a strange simultaneity.”⁴² No present, no future—as chronological time decays, we are locked into an ambiguous *now*.

Whilst Fisher does not fully address the power of media technologies to shape this process, he arrives at a similar conception of temporality to Kittler, except that he tells us that the concept of *futurity* itself has been called into question. But is this necessarily a problem? If ‘*the future*’ as prescribed by modern reifications of what the future *should* entail (not in terms of specific events, but certain meta-tropes, such as concepts of ‘authenticity’ and ‘progress’) is no longer materialising, does that necessarily mean that there is *no future*? If it is linear progression (as set out by modernity) that we are concerned with, then it really does seem as though *the future* as we knew it (was supposed to be) is cancelled, and that millennials are waiting in limbo for *the future* they were implicitly promised to begin, locked into an infernal loop. But if it is a loop, it is one with weaknesses, to be exploited by unknown forces. In place of ‘*the future*,’ we are now faced with *a future*, where chronological time is warped and competing temporalities pull us in different directions. A covert, polyrhythmic *non-future* that is more mysterious, seeping through the apparent stasis of life under late capitalist fixity. A future that is being released from the previous stranglehold of (the media technologies of) modernity.

Obviously neither model of the future—*the* (old) future, an out-dated construction of modernity that no longer suffices; or *a*

40 Ibid., 14-16.

41 Ibid., 8-14.

42 Ibid., 9.

(new) (*non-*)future that consists of multiple, complexly interwoven temporalities and trajectories—is inherently better or possesses more value than the other. Whilst the latter transmuted iteration of the future is more adequate to understanding the vectors of contemporaneity and their potentials, it can be seen to present millennials with a daunting opacity. Indeed, they are described as being born during, and drawing early influence from the last gasp of modernity, the majority being raised by ‘baby boomer’ parents (who were arguably, in their time, the ‘new gen’ *par excellence* regarding their collective realisation of *the* future). Hence it is often noted that the new, unfolding realities that millennials are encountering confound their expectations, resulting in a mass affective dissonance. Millennials are frequently accused of indecision and the deferral of adulthood, but how is one to make choices when one cannot guess with some certainty where they will lead, when those decisions no longer constitute instrumental steps along the path to a clear *telos*, when one can no longer (rightly or wrongly) assume linear temporality to deliver us safely unto ‘*the* future.’

It is at the impasse between *the* future and *a* future, within this *zone of ambiguity*, that the millennial condition takes hold. This *zone of ambiguity*, is not a spatialised zone, despite Fisher suggesting that this “temporal pathology” is mostly relegated to the Occident.⁴³ Generally speaking, info-capitalist globalisation, spearheaded by technologies of sharing and dissemination with their #trending content and viral memes, seems to have corralled most of the world into experiencing similar crises of futurity (though this is not to undermine sociocultural differences that extend beyond the crude distinction between ‘East’ and ‘West’). Instead, the contemporaneous *zone of ambiguity* in which we find ourselves lost in “labyrinths of indeterminacy,”⁴⁴ is a temporalized zone, some sort of transition-period-present, that rather than being situated neatly between a conventional past and future, is something of a gradient over which *a* new (*non-*)future begins to diffuse into *the* future of old. Within this *zone of ambiguity*, caught between two modes of futurity,

43 Ibid., 16.

44 Ibid., 208.

ghosting is symptomatic of the millennial condition. As we are all now attuned to the slow cancellation of (what was supposed to be) *the* future, but also receptive to the guerrilla temporalities that constitute *a* future-to-come, the affective implications are far-reaching. From the resulting vagueness, anxiety, indecision, and adjustment to multiple often conflicting trajectories, comes ghosting as *techno-temporal romantic disenchantment*, paradoxically actualized via an absence of communication.

However, it becomes clear at this point that it is problematic to refer to a ‘millennial generation’ at all. Although many journalists and some theorists alike refer to generations (‘millennials’ or ‘Generation Y,’ the emergent ‘Gen Z,’ ‘Gen X,’ ‘baby boomers’ and so on) to delineate particular modes of subjectivation or identity formation, contemporary technologies are now pivotal in constructing the experiences of almost all age-groups in one manner or another. Hence, in addition to the obvious criticisms levelled at a generational approach to delimiting experience, (that it is reductive, that generational cut-off points are somewhat arbitrary etc.), chronological time is breaking down within society at large, and skewing *all* trajectories in a multi-dimensional manner. Within this *zone of ambiguity*, generations can no longer be assumed to follow one another but are instead, like the rest of the so-called sociocultural field, subject to the logic of fractured techno-temporality.⁴⁵

45 Furthermore, it has become apparent that to maintain an online existence through ‘visibility,’ to garner ‘likes,’ ‘build followers,’ get ‘re-tweeted,’ even forge a profitable career through social media; a state of juvenilia seems to be of benefit. See Jaron Lanier, *You are Not A Gadget: A Manifesto* (London: Penguin, 2011), 179-180. Lanier develops this line of thought suggesting that increasing neoteny is an ever-growing effect of contemporary technologies. He describes neoteny as an “evolutionary strategy,” present to a greater extent in particular species such as the human, where childhood and adolescence are prolonged in order to provide the time and conditions for the development of skills required for survival. Lanier asserts that technological advancements (such as those in the field of medicine) have increased our life-spans, enabling the relative-youthfulness and continued cultural participation of ageing generations (most notably the baby boomers), dispersing their traits and the pop culture of their youth amongst younger generations, which decelerates cultural change and undermines the concept of distinct generations. It also enables

To a certain degree, it can be said that *we are all millennials now*.

Techno-Temporality and the Hyper-Spectrality Effect

The disappearing act of ghosting is, as the term would suggest, a spectral phenomenon that manipulates the virtual absence afforded by contemporary media technologies. Indeed, not only does techno-*temporality* underpin phenomena such as ghosting, it can *itself* be understood to operate in the manner of a perpetually returning specter.

Hauntology,⁴⁶ (a neologism that combines haunt and ontology), is the pre-ontological logic which simultaneously enables and undermines the ontological.⁴⁷ Derrida claims that, “this logic of haunting would not be merely larger and more powerful than an ontology or a thinking of Being,” but that it would “harbor within itself,” and “comprehend” the ontological “incomprehensibly.”⁴⁸ Occupying “neither life nor death,”⁴⁹ the “virtual space of spectrality” obfuscates “the sharp distinction between the real and the unreal, the actual and the inactual, the living and the non-living, being and non-being...what is present and what is not.”⁵⁰ In other words, (and in line with Derrida’s general project of deconstruction), it exposes and degrades these oppositions, transgressing binarism,⁵¹ to enable pure heterogeneity and unqualified possibility (“the specter as possibility”). Derrida tells us that the specter is “as powerful as it is unreal, a hallucination or simulacrum that is virtually more actual than what is so blithely called a living

them to take part in emergent digital culture, which Lanier describes as “wave after wave of juvenilia.” It is especially in their online existences that they, and in fact, all of us remain forever young—Peter Pans of the post-internet age in a (post-)virtual Neverland.

46 Derrida, *Specters of Marx*. Hauntology is first mentioned on page 10.

47 Ibid., 63.

48 Ibid., 10.

49 Ibid., 58.

50 Ibid., 12.

51 Ibid., 13, 94.

presence.”⁵² The specter exposes “the irreducible excess of a dis-jointure or an anachrony...‘some out of joint’ dislocation in Being and in time itself.”⁵³

It could be said that hauntology describes, explicitly spectrally, the function of “differance”, which Derrida clarifies, “does not mean only...deferral, lateness, delay, postponement” of something that eventually fully presents itself. Instead, it refers to the infinite deferral of *presence* itself, where “the here-now unfurls...but without presence.” Instead this ‘here-now’ necessitates “the precipitation of an absolute singularity” that differs in each instance, from its previous iteration.⁵⁴ This aspect, Derrida describes as “the law of iterability.”⁵⁵ Hence, differance can be construed as (something like) the *mechanism* of alterity.⁵⁶ A singularity (an iteration or an event) can no longer be tied to a static essence, presence or “the Being of beings,”⁵⁷ but instead is displaced by a heterogeneous, corrupted origin.⁵⁸ That is to say, “*it begins by coming back.*”⁵⁹ In his formulation of hauntology, Derrida likens “the event” to “a specter” that returns repeatedly, with each return marking “a first time,” but also a “last time, since the singularity of any *first time*, makes of it also a *last time.*” Hence, each time it is the new “event itself,” and is “altogether other,” other to its previous iteration and the next iteration to come.⁶⁰

Thinking with Shakespeare’s Hamlet, Derrida writes:

The time is out of joint. The world is going badly. It is worn but its wear no longer counts. Old age or youth—one no longer counts in that way. The world has more than one age. We lack the measure of measure. We no longer realize the wear, we no longer take account of it as of a single age in the progress of history.

52 Ibid., 13.

53 Ibid., 32.

54 Ibid., 37.

55 Ibid., 64-65.

56 Ibid., 37.

57 Ibid., 63.

58 Ibid., 25.

59 Ibid., 11.

60 Ibid., 10.

Neither maturation, nor crisis, nor even agony. Something else. What is happening is happening to age itself, it strikes a blow at the teleological order of history. What is coming, in which the untimely appears, is happening to time but it does not happen in time. Contretemps. *The time is out of joint.*⁶¹

Hauntologically speaking then, time itself is “radically dis-jointed.” Rather than a conventional past, present and future, time is instead infinitely fragmented and does not actually “hold together.” This is not in the sense that the conjunctions are broken or malfunctioning, but rather that there are no such conjunctions.⁶² The so-called present lacks presence, and is non-contemporaneous with itself,⁶³ its very situation between an apparent past that seems to become absent, and an apparent future that seems yet to become present, revealing that presence itself is “distributed in the two directions of absence.”⁶⁴ Hence Derrida prefers to refer to a “here-now” rather than a present that has presence in any proper sense. Instead, this “here-now” is neither present nor absent.⁶⁵ The coming or apparent return of the ghost (as something-other to its previous iteration) demonstrates this dislocation of conventional time when, “what seems to be out front, the future, comes back in advance: from the past, from the back.”⁶⁶ Hence, the future and the past (as returning specter) become indistinguishable.⁶⁷ Indeed, Derrida remarks, “the specter *is* the future,” and so the very concept of linear temporality is thrown into doubt through this “*spectrality effect*,”⁶⁸ where any future that precipitates in the ‘here-now,’ is at once “very novel and so ancient.”⁶⁹ In this sense, the past can be re-cast as “absolute future,” or “the-future-to-come as much as

61 Ibid., 96.

62 Ibid., 20.

63 Ibid., 29.

64 Ibid., 29-30.

65 Ibid., 39.

66 Ibid., 10.

67 Ibid., 46.

68 Ibid., 48. My italics in the first quote.

69 Ibid., 62.

a past,⁷⁰ where what was seen as absent, relegated to a seemingly out-of-reach past, returns repeatedly “anew, as the new,” as the ‘here-now.’⁷¹

The similarity to Kittler’s concept of recursion is obvious, with the major difference being that Derrida arrives at his conclusion via the hauntological deconstruction of chronological time *in general*, whilst Kittler is astute to the fact that, (contra the technologies of the past that constructed chronological time) contemporary media technologies are already driving this anachrony to the *n*th degree and into our consciousnesses. Contemporary technologies are a superlative spectralizing force, exerting a *hyper-“spectrality effect.”*

Although not the focus of his work,⁷² Derrida does at times note the particular affinity of contemporary media technologies with hauntology, describing “the medium of the media themselves” as “neither living nor dead, present nor absent,” an “element” that “spectralizes.” It is worth remembering that the word ‘medium’ is often used to describe an interlocutor who converses with ghosts, transmitting and voicing the spectral; and it is as conveyor of the spectral, but also creator of spectrality and intrinsically spectral itself, that Derrida refers to this “medium of the media.”⁷³ He states that the power of media to affect experience has grown in an exponential manner, that these media exert an ever-growing control on the very structure and concept of the public realm and as such, “media tele-technology, economy, and power [are linked] in their irreducibly spectral dimension.”⁷⁴ On numerous occasions, he remarks on the acceleration of spectrality introduced by contemporary media: “the new speed of *apparition...of the simulacrum,*

70 Ibid., 19.

71 Ibid., 61.

72 *Specters of Marx* was first published in 1993, during the ‘digital age’ but before the rise of social media and the so-called ‘post-internet age’ which refers to the wide-spread use of internet-based media.

73 Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 63.

74 Ibid., 65.

the synthetic or prosthetic image,”⁷⁵ “the speed of a virtuality,”⁷⁶ “new rhythms of information and communication...and the speed of forces.”⁷⁷ Contemporary media technologies have indeed catalysed the production and appearance of ghosts—splintering, collapsing and manipulating time further—multiplying the vectors of spectrality at an unprecedented rate and scale.

The Visor Effect and the Justice of the Specter

Derrida’s discussion of the ‘visor effect,’ with regard to the figure of the specter, bears particular relevance to ghosting and its specific connection to contemporary media. This visor effect refers to the power of the specter to “see without being seen”⁷⁸ between apparitions; to occupy a state of being invisible or “*nothing* [rendered] visible.”⁷⁹ Derrida writes:

Nor does one see in flesh and blood this Thing that is not a thing, this thing that is invisible between its apparitions, when it reappears. This Thing meanwhile looks at us and sees us not see it even when it is there. A spectral asymmetry interrupts here all specularity. It de-synchronizes, it recalls us to anachrony. We will call this the *visor effect*: we do not see who looks at us.⁸⁰

The ‘visor’ is specifically chosen to describe this effect in reference to the armour worn by Derrida’s exemplary specter of choice—that of the King from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. This armour not only conceals the body of the specter, preventing proper identification, but the visor is fashioned in such a manner as to allow the specter of the King to conceal his eyes whilst still being able to see.⁸¹

There are here various resonances with ghosting, the most

75 Ibid., 67.
 76 Ibid., 79.
 77 Ibid., 98.
 78 Ibid., 7.
 79 Ibid., 5.
 80 Ibid., 6.
 81 Ibid., 7-8.

obvious being that those who experience it are laid bare; “we feel ourselves being looked at,”⁸² by the specter, the enactor who ghosts, whilst we cannot see them. To go further, it is the contemporary media themselves—through which ghosting is enacted—that function in the manner of the armour, especially the visor, in their exposure or making *visible* of those who are ghosted, and their simultaneous concealment and protection of those who wish to ghost. Indeed, somewhat similarly to McLuhan’s assertion that media technologies function as extensions of Man, Derrida describes the armour as “a kind of technical prosthesis, a body foreign to the spectral body that it dresses, dissimulates and protects.”⁸³

Ultimately, it is towards the returning (and re-returning) specter *as* the anachrony inherent in the law of iterability, that Derrida leads us in his discussion of the visor effect, where the specter seems to regard us constantly from underneath its visor and from before we might glimpse it (never to *know* it in its totality). It watches us from “outside of any synchrony, even before and beyond any look on our part, according to an absolute anteriority.” This *specter-as-anachrony* conditions our trajectories, making our relation to it *asymmetrical*.⁸⁴ This seems particularly pertinent in the case of the new rhythms of return set into motion by a hyper-anachronous techno-time, anterior to post-human experience.

Indeed, as the specter utilises the visor effect, it haunts “all places at the same time,” and is “atopic (mad and non-localizable).”⁸⁵ Thus, in its omnipresence and just like s/he who ghosts without explanation and at the same time *haunts* the jilted lover, the specter cannot be mourned. That is to say there is never any closure. According to Derrida, in order to mourn, we must *identify* the corpse and *localize* it such that we can be sure that it will ‘stay in its place,’ secure in our knowledge of its eternal inertia. A specter that cannot be identified underneath its visor, and is in all places at once cannot be mourned since it is not a corpse and can-

82 Ibid., 6.

83 Ibid., 7.

84 Ibid., 6-7.

85 Ibid., 168.

not be known to be dead (nor alive for that matter). Worse still, the visor enables it to *act* without being seen.⁸⁶ In a similar manner, a relationship that has not died any kind of proper death (but also shows no vital signs) cannot be properly mourned, *known* to have ended and therefore relegated to a virtual past that does not act. Instead, the specter acts via haunting, it “*works*” as Derrida phrases it—“the spirit of the spirit’ is *work*” and this so-called “*work*” is absolute “*transformation*.”⁸⁷ The churning of iterability, or the machinations of alterity.

Elsewhere, Derrida articulates this ‘work’ or transformative power of the specter as ‘justice.’ However, he is clear to differentiate this justice from common notions of “calculable and distributive” justice. This justice of the specter is not that which concerns “the law, for the calculation of restitution, the economy of vengeance or punishment...calculable equality...sanctioning...[or] *doing right*.” Instead, this justice is synonymous with a confrontation *with* and *alteration by* a radical other, and through this other, *otherness* itself.⁸⁸ In other words, the specter functions as a conduit for otherness (it is the other *possessed by otherness*), for this confrontation with the specter marks a profound shift in oneself. Indeed, one is “equally terrorized by the ghost, the ghost of the other, and its own ghost as the ghost of the other...the one in front of it and the one it carries within itself.”⁸⁹ In our sudden exposure to this *other* that seems to defy chronological time, life and death, we are opened to the “disjuncture [that is] the very possibility of the other,”⁹⁰ where justice involves the “*articulation*” of “the disjuncture of the present time.”⁹¹ It is this “justice as relation to the other” that also constitutes a relation to anachrony, to the absolute past (“before any past present”) as future-to-come, that is itself “the very condition of the

86 Ibid., 9.

87 Ibid., 9.

88 Ibid., 26. Derrida recognizes here, his debt to Lévinas in the former’s definition of justice as “the relation to others.”

89 Ibid., 131.

90 Ibid., 26.

91 Ibid., 29. My italics

present.”⁹²

In thinking with Derrida, we can consider ghosting as such an *articulation*, “a *doing* that would not amount only to action,”⁹³ that paradoxically *silently* articulates this disjuncture “between what absents itself and what presents itself,”⁹⁴ i.e. an absencing past of *present* communications and a present that presents an *absence* of communication. Ghosting deploys a spectral justice, not in the sense of an individual ‘getting what they deserve,’ but rather as a relational intervention amidst the frenzy of networked communications, where a stark encounter with the *unknowable* otherness of the other constitutes an intimate encounter with one’s own *unknowable* otherness. It is a *non-act* situated between action and inaction that *works*, that has the power to profoundly affect not only the individual who ghosts, but also the individual being ghosted, undermining any notions of fixed, essential identity and chronological linearity, and throwing into sharp relief the ephemerality of the (romantic) other and oneself. After all, any individual is “constituted by specters of which it becomes the host and which it assembles in the haunted community of a single body.”⁹⁵

Contemporary Identity Politics/Segregative Time/ Fractured Temporalities

With the rise of contemporary identity politics, from the online murk of supposed cyber-fluidity, have emerged *segregated zones* of ‘tribes’ or individuals—from ‘incels’ (involuntary celibates) colonising Reddit to QTPoC (Queer Transgender People of Colour) activists forming vast networks of ‘followers’ on Instagram, and seeking to *#decolonize*.⁹⁶ In these zones, the processual individuation

92 Ibid., 32-33.

93 Ibid., 32.

94 Ibid., 29.

95 Ibid., 166.

96 The term ‘#decolonize’ marks a conscious move often by second- or third- generation immigrants from former colonies to actively embrace

that makes flows of subjectivities in their continuous ephemerality is over-coded; online *identities* proliferate, fixing, semiotizing and grouping according to perceived similarities.

Marie-Hélène Brousse remarks: “It is appropriate to see the field of identity politics as a ramification of new barriers, and to see a development of segregation in the multiplication of identity claims.”⁹⁷ She suggests that previously, segregation was imposed whereas now, segregation is desired and “even demanded,”⁹⁸ such that groups and individuals self-segregate according to particular valued characteristics.⁹⁹ Brousse notes the link between this self-segregation and the the processing of data.¹⁰⁰ Indeed, in light of Kittler’s emphasis on the power of technology to structure identity, sociality and politics, it becomes clear that contemporary media drive and host such segregations (as algorithmically-designated zones), in a complex process of assemblage-formation that extends beyond algorithmic profiling, advert-targeting and suggested user content.

In this climate of techno-eutrophication—i.e. excessive provision by contemporary media technologies of the ‘nutrients’ that feed the manic proliferation of identities—the crude, oppositional identity groups of the past mutate and are multiplied, returning like Derrida’s *revenant*, as something-other. In place of the few binaristic divisions within the field of identity politics, have bloomed vast arrays of more nuanced and specific *segregated zones*. For example, we need only look to feminist identity politics to see how it is becoming ever-more divided into Intersectional Feminists, Ecofeminists, #GLITCHFEMINISTS, Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists (or TERFs, that don’t tend to label themselves

(elements of) their ethnic heritage. On social media, this concept has gained popularity with the use of hashtags: #decolonize, #decolonizeyourwardrobe and so on.

97 Marie-Hélène Brousse, “Segregations/Subversion,” *The Lacanian Review* 3 (2017), “Segregations: Desire as Subversion of Identity”: 5-9, 5.

98 Ibid.

99 Ibid., 7.

100 Ibid., 6-7.

as such but seem to be banding together under *some* banner nonetheless) and so on. New (sub-)cultural trends are led, not so much by music and the associated fashion and politics as they were previously, but instead by internet culture and the associated online aesthetics and identity politics. Furthermore, the formerly niche inclination to combine the internet with politics has since spread throughout the social field.

Segregated zones are assemblages within assemblages within a wider assemblage. Whilst on the one hand these zones seem discrete and exclusive, paradoxically on the other, they are interconnected and in fact, some are co-dependent—relying on one another for their existence. More often than not, these relationships are reactive, symbiotic in their antagonism. The on-going internet war between the ‘woke’-left¹⁰¹ and the ‘alt-right’¹⁰² only increases the energy, reach, and numbers of recruits of *both* conglomerate (or mega-)groups.¹⁰³

What appeared previously as a *zone of ambiguity*, (where a brave new future diffuses into the obsolescing chronological future of modernity), can now be exposed as a battleground for competing temporalities tied to competing segregated identity groups. Techno-time itself has become segregative, splitting linear trajectories, dividing populations and forming the *segregated zones* that each precipitate, and are precipitated by, their own fractured temporalities. They seek to re-write history, to (re-)write the future, to

101 The term ‘woke’ refers to a socio-political awakening of sorts, an increased awareness of systems of oppression and sensitivity to the effects of these. The ‘woke’-left are a new millennial left, that are often positively associated with awareness of issues relating to marginalized groups, but negatively associated with ‘call-out culture,’ and are sometimes mockingly called ‘social justice warriors.’

102 The ‘alt-right’ are a right-wing mega-group, consisting of various sub-groups from neo-Nazis to Men’s Rights Activists. A particularly noted characteristic of the ‘alt-right’ is its complexity and (self-)differentiation from the *traditional* ‘right-wing.’

103 See Angela Nagle, *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars from 4Chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2017). Nagle extensively addresses this antagonistic symbiosis.

demarcate trajectories according to their particular brand of identity politics—but the effect thus far appears not to be domination by one group or another but further splitting, further segregation.

Returning to Bauman’s relationship-as-network, in which it is just as easy to connect as to disconnect or where connections can be *exited*, ghosting can also be understood to function as a method of exiting a romantic relationship/network, and thus exiting the *segregated zone*-assemblage that the relationship/network is a constituent of. ghosting then, describes spectral trajectories of syncopated absence/presence, anachronous rhythms of Derridean ‘justice’ that have their own evasive velocities that elude the domineering temporality of the *segregated zone*. It is a “becoming-imperceptible,”¹⁰⁴ to borrow again from Deleuze and Guattari; not quite the transformation of ultimate intensity that they describe, but a “deterritorialization”¹⁰⁵ nonetheless—a disruption of the structure of the *segregated zone*, a destabilisation and movement away from a previous configuration—that utilises imperceptibility or Derrida’s visor effect as a means of escape.

But this is not an escape from media technologies altogether. In fact, these technologies drive segregation, whilst simultaneously encouraging exit from one zone and entry into another. As such, techno-temporality is both a “deterritorializing” and “reterritorializing” force,¹⁰⁶ demonstrated by phenomena such as ‘lurking’ (when an individual views content posted on chatrooms/message boards/social media sites but does not post any content themselves or interact with others’ posts); ‘haunting’ (when an individual ‘lurks’ but sporadically engages in interactions, such as ‘liking’ a photo); and anonymous ‘trolling’ (which usually involves posting abusive comments under a cryptic pseudonym, in response to content posted on social media sites). These phenomena all involve modes of imperceptibility in order to transit between zones. In *Cloud Time*, Coley & Lockwood note this tendency of a machinic

104 Ibid., see chapter “1730: Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible,” 271-360.

105 Ibid., 387-388, 587, and throughout.

106 Ibid.

non-human techno-capitalism, which “seizes and mimics escape in order to mutate, it needs its wandering bodies...It deterritorializes, renders fluid, unleashes desire, but only to recode, to regulate, to sort, sieve, anticipate and modulate by virtue of the technology of control.”¹⁰⁷

This contradictory mechanism *controls* millennial love itself. Although the *zone of love* is often thought to be a transcendental realm outside of time, it is instead subject to the temporal logic of contemporary technology. That is not to say we are all doomed to ghost and be ghosted. Whilst it pushes some apart, it also pushes others together in a saccharine articulation of excess. Take the ever stranger romance between goth-pop waif Grimes and tech-billionaire Elon Musk, for example. Journalist Naomi Fry comments:

Seen together, the couple appeared radically mismatched: not unlike, as one friend noted, a cater waiter picking up his girlfriend from a Siouxsie Sioux-themed costume party...Largely thanks to social media, we have lately been experiencing the world as an enormous, fast-moving combinator...In this context, the weirdness of a union-busting billionaire with neo-colonial leanings suddenly dating a quirky Canadian musician who, until recently, had ‘anti-imperialist’ in her Twitter bio makes a certain kind of sense.¹⁰⁸

Whilst this union of figures from two seemingly oppositional subcultures elicited shock (from both Silicon Valley ‘tech-bros’ and Grimes fans alike), Grimes + Musk could not be more *New Techno-Capitalist Dream Team*TM. Not only did they meet on Twitter; not only did their initial contact stem from Musk tweeting “‘Rococo Basilisk,’ a near-nonsensical pun riffing on the A.I. thought experiment Roko’s Basilisk,”¹⁰⁹ and then discovering that Grimes had tweeted the same pun three years previously; but most signifi-

107 Rob Coley and Dean Lockwood, *Cloud Time: The Inception of the Future* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2012), 23.

108 Naomi Fry, “The Trouble with Elon Musk and Grimes,” *The New Yorker*, last modified May 10, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/annals-of-appearances/the-trouble-with-elon-musk-and-grimes>.

109 Ibid.

cantly they move in and out of the *segregated zones* that one another inhabit. Whilst both predominantly occupy different zones, this alternation back and forth between each other's zones makes them into the "wandering bodies" of which Coley and Lockwood speak. It is the different modes of travel between (and within) zones that constitute different registers of contemporary sociality, of disenchantment and re-enchantment, and of experiencing ourselves and each other as post-human.