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GLITCHES AND GHOSTS (APRIL 17, 2019)

Conference Report by Vicki Williams

Glitches and Ghosts. **Lancaster University, UK. 17 April 2019.**

The first ever *Glitches and Ghosts* conference took place on 17th April 2019 at Lancaster University. Organised by PhD researcher Kerry Dodd and Brian Baker (Lancaster University, UK), the conference welcomed researchers from across the disciplines to discuss intersections of mediated error and the supernatural. In particular, the day sought to consider the ways the ethereality of new media and their technological systems are captured (or fail to be captured) by language – particularly that which obfuscates complex system processes, anthropomorphises machine agencies, and leaves the unique affective potentials of our interactions with new media behind. The conference consisted of six panels made up of twenty speakers, including a smart kettle and Google Home assistant who co-presented one paper, and the keynote speaker for the day, Will Slocombe (University of Liverpool, UK). The conference theme invited a number of key central concerns, but formations of digital-oriented ontologies prevailed. Indeed, considerations of design, process, and ontological formations brought together all of the glitches and ghosts that were present, or made present, in the fantastic talks presented. To use a diagram to illustrate the central concerns of the day seems to do it some injustice, but a short discussion period during the conference lead the collective of researchers to come to the following:

	G|G	
	L|L	
HUMAN	I|I	THING
	T|T	
	C|C	
	H|H	

Such assemblages of humans, glitches, and things were presented via a number of mediums and technological emergences, including: Creepypasta, music albums and digital distribution of music, YouTube playthroughs, (video)games, Virtual and Augmented Reality (VR/AR), streaming platforms, internet of things, contemporary art, surveillance and cybersecurity, algorithmic culture, and the novel. Such diverse considerations of manifestations of both glitches and ghosts leave an exciting legacy, which is being followed up by an edited collection on the conference theme.

It seems appropriate to initiate discussion of the panels with a quote given as part of Will Slocombe's keynote talk from Italo Calvino's lecture on "Cybernetics and Ghosts" (1967): "The more enlightened our houses are, the more their walls ooze with ghosts." Glitches and ghosts both

emerge as unruly presences – things that challenge ontological boundaries and inspire knew forms of knowledge and agency beyond the humanist subject. With Calvino's quote in mind, the day was certainly enlightening in thinking about the multitudinous ways glitches and ghosts are being approached in contemporary academia and beyond, from various disciplines including, but not limited to: English Literature, Linguistics, Media Studies, Sociology, Design, Musicology, and Game Studies. The day began with an opening address from the conference organisers. Kerry Dodd made reference to the pre-conference Twitter ramblings and networks which had led to speculation that speakers might be "ghosting through walls" to be able to move seamlessly and stealthily between panel talks.

The panel themes emphasise the multidisciplinary, multisensory explorations of the glitch and its prevalence in contemporary Anglo-American technoculture. Panels 1A and 1B explored "Disrupted Transmissions" and "Cybermyths and Spectral Realities." These first panels of the day shared considerations of the agency of the virtual and the blurred lines of authorship and agency implicated by both the glitch and the ghost. Whilst maintaining focus on the current state of 'digital culture' and digital cultural studies, talks posed the question of what the glitch might offer in terms of thinking beyond the textual interface – engaging with various multimedia practices. Joe Ondrak's (Sheffield Hallam University, UK) paper "Beyond the LCD Veil: Creepypasta's Annihilation of Digital Reality" considered the emergent genre of Creepypasta fiction and the way it relies on the digital form. Ondrak likened this reliance to the spectral by arguing for Creepypasta's flattening of individuals via digital, which links inherently to Horror through the ways it seems to self-evolve, marking a process of uncanny affect. Henry Morgan's (Cardiff University, UK) paper "Hypergrunge and the boy with the melting face: authorship, horror and fragments of identity surrounding Daniel Lopatin's *Garden of Delete*" explored the ways in which music and digital culture coalesce. Morgan's paper examined the intersections of the posthuman, the hyperreal, and the album-as-assemblage. Hayley Louise Charlesworth (Manchester Metropolitan University, UK) then considered the emergence of "YouTube Horror' in her paper "You Made Him Real: Interactive Digital Haunting's for the YouTube Generation." Charlesworth's presentation delved into the creation of YouTube doppelgangers and the various ways interactive storytelling is used across digital platforms.

Panels 2A and 2B explored "Affective Narratives" and "Algorithmic Détournment"; the second round of panels centred upon both the affective and systemic infrastructures of the glitch, and the ways they seep into everyday lived encounters with digital technologies. Talks considered the evolution of glitch aesthetics in videogames, whilst moving into the emergent and disruptive capacities of mediated error to challenge embedded cybersecurity systems, algorithms and to enable various kinds of social protest. Stephen Curtis' (Lancaster University, UK) paper "From Descartes to Tron and Beyond: What Do You Do if the Ghost in the Machine is You?" considered the semantic shift of the word 'save' as it has become associated most explicitly with the digital. Curtis looked at the metaphysical evolution of the 'ghost within the machine trope,' analysing the ways humans are preoccupied with the frailties of the fleshy form. Vicki Williams (University of Birmingham, UK) followed with her paper "Feeling the Presence of Mediated Error: Glitch Ecologies, Horror, and the Phenomenology of Virtual Reality." Williams' paper considered the ways glitches interact with their

users in a more embodied and visceral manner in immersive technologies, adding new cartographies of immersive glitch to current theorisations. Charlotte Gislam (Manchester Metropolitan University, UK) presented on "Glitches and their Emergent Capabilities: Replicating the Anomalies of Digital Game Narratives." Gislam explored the different implications of glitches within gaming narratives, arguing that the glitch provides the truest form of emergent narrative within gamespaces.

The final panels of the day were "Theorising the Glitch" and "Phasing through Boundaries." As the panel titles emphasise, talks thought about the ontological instability of the glitch and the ways digital presences manifest visually and experientially. The talks continued to explore the affective coming-into-contact with the glitch as a kind of post-anthropocentric encounter. Joseph Lindley (Lancaster University, UK), presented his research into Design Fiction with the help of a smart kettle and Google Assistant in his paper "Ghost Hunting with Object Oriented Ontology and Animism." The two smart objects were given opportunity to engage in a conversation with one another, challenging one another's agential capacities – the smart kettle sharply uttering "but you can't boil water though, can you?" This talk, along with the others of the day, emphasised the relevance of object-oriented ontologies (OOO), animism, and post-anthropocentric theoretical frameworks for understanding the complex agencies and presences of glitches as important and valid objects for critical concern. Kerry Dodd's (Lancaster University, UK) paper "Rendering the Ghost: Towards a Digital-orientated Ontology" considered the mixed ontologies implicated in digital spaces, looking closely at the TV series *Mr Robot* (2015-2019). David Hulks (University of East Anglia, UK) presented on 'The Glitchiness of Contemporary Art.' Hulks' paper considered the human desire for error, and the ways artworks emerge as living systems.

During a short 20 minute discussion section after lunch, speakers and audience members reconvened for the section of the day entitled "Please Stand By." Two 'glitch' video montages, created by the collaborative artists Matthews AND Allen, were shown to the audience of attendees, made up of footage of various malfunctioning machine assemblages from World War One to the present day. The short videos inspired conversations about the roots of digital ephemerality, moving from the server to the cloud, and the utilitarian aspects of contemporary technological use. Attendees also discussed the gendered roots of spiritualism and the ways this coincided with the female role of 'computer' during the World Wars.

Will Slocombe's keynote talk "On System Interrupts and the Structural Imagination" was a fascinating and rigorous exploration of system interrupts, particularly in relation to fictions concerned with Artificial Intelligence (AI). Slocombe considered the "structural imagination," as a way of thinking about the imaginings of AI and their presentation in both written and visual fictions. The paper considered the visualisation of the glitch and the ghost, leading Slocombe to argue that the ghost is a reality glitch – an unruly presence which marks a breakthrough. The glitch, Slocombe considered, can also be a voice of freedom enabled when there is a breaking through *into* a system. Slocombe's paper explored the mixed representations and theorisations of surface and depth in considerations of glitch and error, linking this to debates around narratology and discourse-as-interface which is to read *through*. Slocombe's book *Emergent Patterns: Artificial Intelligence and the Structural Imagination* was published with Peter Lang in 2019.

Overall, the *Glitches and Ghosts* conference provided a really unique opportunity for researchers of a fairly niche subject area to come together and share their work; this was particularly effective given that researchers were at all stages of their careers. The organisation of the conference was stellar, and Kerry did a fantastic job of putting together the programme and circulating information to attendees prior to event. Both Kerry and Brian were incredible hosts and initiated some really enlightening discussions throughout the day. The conference left me with a real sense of the importance of considering mediated error as a fruitful and important enterprise. Glitches entertain the strange and the beautiful, the unproductive and the productive, surface and depth. I truly look forward to reading the papers that have come out of the conference, and look forward to *Glitches and Ghosts* conference #2!

WORKS CITED

Calvino, Italo. "Cybernetics and Ghosts." *The Uses of Literature Essays*. Translated by Patrick Creagh, Harcourt Brace & Co, 1986, 3-27.

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Vicki Williams is a doctoral researcher in the English Department at the University of Birmingham, UK. Her research focuses on the ways identity and embodiment are captured in and through immersive virtual environments and virtual reality (VR) in particular. She has published work on the compatibility of virtual reality and the Horror genre. Her research interests include phenomenology, immersive technologies, mediated horror and glitch studies. Vicki also co-convenes the PLAY/PAUSE videogame and VR seminar series at the University of Birmingham.