

## Academetron, automaton, phantom: uncanny digital pedagogies

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This paper explores the possibility of an uncanny digital pedagogy. Drawing on theories of the uncanny from psychoanalysis, cultural studies and educational philosophy, it considers how being online defamiliarises teaching, asking us to question and consider anew established academic practices and conventions. It touches on recent thinking on higher education as troublesome, anxiety-inducing and 'strange', viewing online learning and teaching practices through the lens of an uncanny which is productively disruptive in its challenging of the 'certainties' of place, body, time and text. Uncanny pedagogies are seen as a generative way of working with the new ontologies of the digital.

**Keywords:** uncanny; digital; pedagogy; course design; hauntology

### Introduction

Fiction, dreaming, machining, and hauntology. Where do these belong, if they belong at all, in the House of Learning? (Kochhar-Lindgren 2009, 8)

The university, its inhabitants and the project of teaching and learning are being rendered uncanny by the workings of digital technology. Alongside calls for a greater focus on ontology within the academy (Barnett 2005, 2007) come digital interventions in academic practice which foreground the uncanny operations of technology on the formation, and re-formation, of such ontologies. The uncanny figure of the cyborg functions as 'a cipher for larger cultural debates on the nature of being' (Grenville 2001), alongside other discourses concerned with machinic mediation, penetration, fusion and transformation.

This paper is concerned with the themes of ghostliness, haunting and the 'strange' in relation to online teaching and learning and the identities and practices of students and academics. Building on earlier work (Bayne 2008a) in which I suggest that virtual worlds might become a site for the exploration of pedagogies concerned with the ontological, I attempt here to extend this idea into other digital learning environments, by considering the operations of the digital uncanny on our notions of place, body and time. Drawing on theories of the uncanny from psychoanalysis, cultural studies and educational philosophy I will explore, with examples, the possibility of a generative uncanny pedagogy within the context of the digital.

The uncanny is to do with a sense of creeping strangeness, a strangeness located in ontological disturbance – 'it is a crisis of the natural, touching upon everything that one might have thought was "part of nature": one's own nature, human nature, the nature of reality and the world' (Royle 2003, 1). As posited most famously by Freud (1919/2003), building on the work of Jentsch (1908), it is to do with the *unheimliche* (literally, the 'unhomely'), the familiar being rendered unfamiliar, a blurring of the boundary between the animate and the inanimate, the living and the dead, the embodied and the disembodied, the present and the past or absent.

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Its connection and concern with the workings of new technologies have been much discussed (see Royle 2003; Coyne 2005; Ramey 2005; Weight 2006), but the theme of the uncanny has been under-considered in discussions about the place of the contemporary university, and the project of learning and teaching within the digital. As Kocchar-Lindgren (2009) describes, in his exploration of the possibility of 'phantomenology' in the theorising of education:

As some of us within the university... attempt to 'think the uncanny' along the lines of phantomenology, what experience will emerge for the academetron, that learning machine in which we all participate and that produces through the operations of reason so much useful and quantifiable knowledge? If there is anything to this being haunted within the university...it will show itself not only in the density of a philosophical discourse dispersed throughout a variety of departments, but also in our everyday habits of teaching, learning, reading, and writing... Indeed, one of the effects of haunting will be to destabilize the traditional modern site of teaching, the classroom, and its place in the so-called system of the university. (Kocchar-Lindgren 2009, 4)

For in working online as teachers and learners, we are working in 'destabilized' classrooms, engaging in spaces and practices which are disquieting, disorienting, strange, anxiety-inducing, uncanny. For Boon and Sinclair (2009), writing about the experience of being a learner within *Second Life* and *Facebook*, this disquiet is located in a new relation to the real and to the sense of oneself: 'this is a new kind of experience, a new metaphor, a new world in which to re/create ourselves, re/imagine our relationships to others, and re/evaluate the real and the unreal' (103). In its engagement with 'a wide range of technologies of de- and rematerialization' (Kocchar-Lindgren 2009, 7), teaching practice is increasingly concerned with the ghostly, the haunted, the strange and the ontologically disturbing. For these are technologies which commingle the familiar and the unfamiliar (Royle 2003, 1), positioning us *differently* on the continuum of presence/absence.

There are perhaps two ways of responding to the disquiet generated by these new positionings, this sudden unfamiliarity of our textual and communicative practices. For Carrington (2005), writing about the 'uncanny' literacy practices of school-age children, and associated conceptions of childhood itself, 'There is a need to articulate the unfamiliarity of childhood and new forms of text and to construct bridges to a sense of familiarity' (480). We need, she hints, to make the unfamiliar familiar, to 'normalise' to an extent the uncanniness of the digital text. Other writing, however, stresses the *value* to teaching of the sense of the uncanny, of the way in which a defamiliarisation of the strange act of teaching can be generative, something to value rather than to resolve. To 'think the uncanny' is 'to be uncertain, to question, to experience, in strangely new ways' (Royle 2003, 14).

There are connections here with recent thinking in higher education teaching which stresses the place of the troublesome, the anxiety-inducing, the strange and the liminal (Bayne 2008a). Meyer and Land (2005) describe the notion of the 'threshold concept', a grappling with 'troublesome' areas of the curriculum (Perkins 1999, 2005) which prompts a 'transformation' in the student, a 'reconstruction of subjectivity' (Meyer and Land 2005, 7). Further:

Difficulty in understanding threshold concepts may leave the learner in a state of *liminality* (Latin *limen* – 'threshold'), a suspended state in which understanding approximates to a kind of mimicry or lack of authenticity... the insights gained when the learner crosses the threshold might also be unsettling, involving a sense of loss. (Meyer and Land 2005, 16)

In drawing on the tropes of liminality, mimicry and 'sense of loss' Meyer and Land share the terms of the uncanny in describing the act and process of learning, and its effects on the subjectivity of the student. For the uncanny 'has to do with a strangeness of framing and borders, an experience of liminality' (Royle 2003, 1), while 'mimicry is a dark practice, beyond the pale of rationality' (Coyne 2005, 10).

For Barnett (2005), the notion of ‘strangeness’ promises nothing less than a ‘new universal’ for the university in an age of supercomplexity. Teaching in this vision becomes focused on ‘the production of human capacities... for the personal assimilation and creation of strangeness’:

Such a conception of ‘teaching’ looks to a fundamental break with conventional pedagogical relationships and look to curricula that present awkward spaces to and for students. Through such spaces, they will realize for themselves their capacities for assimilating and even for producing strangeness. (Barnett 2005, 795)

Such a vision, and such spaces, will represent what is for Barnett an urgently-needed ‘ontological turn’ in higher education, a greater concern with the nature of being in relation to teaching and learning, and a nurturing in students of the ability to live with intellectual uncertainty (Barnett 2007). For Royle too, ‘intellectual uncertainty’ – central to many understandings of the uncanny (Haughton 2003; Kristeva 1991; Jentsch 1908) – is something generative, exhilarating and ‘a crucial dimension of any teaching worth of the name’ (Royle 2003, 52). Volatile, unfamiliar digital spaces for learning perhaps materialise and to an extent *literalise* Barnett’s ‘awkward spaces’ – when used well, they open to us vibrant new domains where generative intellectual uncertainties might be nurtured.

Barnett’s discussion, unlike Royle’s, does not explicitly reference the uncanny. Where Barnett calls for an ‘ontological turn’ in higher education, Royle extends this via the terms of ‘hauntology’, claiming that patterns of influence and memory mean that there is ‘no teaching without memory of the dead’ (53). ‘Hauntology’ is a term taken from Derrida’s *Spectres of Marx* (1994) (being a close homonym of ‘ontology’) to think through the state of the spectre as neither being nor not-being, and to re-think the nature of past, present and future in terms of ‘a... successive linking of presents’ (17).

Reflection on the operations of temporality within the digital, as this paper will show, is key to understanding how we might formulate a pedagogy which takes account of the multiple synchronicities available to us when we work online. At the same time, the ontological blurring of being and not-being, presence and absence online, are crucial in considering how distance modes re-position the ‘thereness’ of learners and teachers, rendering us in a sense ghost-like, spectres ‘hovering between... presence and absence, and making established certainties vacillate’ (Davis 2005, 376). As Kocchar-Lindgren (2009) describes it, ‘ghosts, as liminal figures of repetition... break open the old structures that wish to reproduce themselves, disturb the “traditional” epistemological and pedagogical order of the university’ (10).

The remainder of this paper will demonstrate how, through consideration of the ‘uncanny’ effects of digital mediation on teaching and learning, we can build on the positive and generative interpretations of strangeness, intellectual uncertainty and ‘ghostliness’ in formulating a radical new (online) pedagogy which has to do with the ‘phantomenological’:

As we in the university know... the academetron will keep running full speed ahead for the sake of the incorporated state for as far ahead as we can see, though here and there – in the shadows of the interstices of the institution – there are almost silent glitches in the machine as it reorganizes itself, phantomenological encounters that make their own claims. (Kocchar-Lindgren 2009, 9)

I will approach the possibility of the ‘phantomenological’ pedagogical encounter via the themes of place, body, time and text.

## A place of ghosts

In his exploration of the various cultural manifestations of the uncanny, Royle describes the university as ‘a ghostly institution... haunted not only by questions concerning the nature of teaching but also by a sense of its relationship to itself and to its own past’ (54). The university’s

digital futures promise more of this spectrality, as technologically-mediated communication makes distant engagement with its pedagogies increasingly viable, and increasingly desirable. The university becomes 'emptied' of the bodies of its students and teachers who engage with each other – in new and often greater intimacy – through the multiple media of the screen, and in a fluctuating orientation to the notion of 'being there'. For the so-called distance learner, as for teachers engaging increasingly with remote and online teaching methods, the relation to the university as institution changes dramatically. The material proximity or even existence of the campus becomes of far less significance than the symbolic status of the institution and its virtual presence across the various nodes of the network. Institutional 'capital', once signified by bricks, mortar and physical proximity with an academic community, becomes diffused by the network as 'place' and 'learning community' lose their material anchor and become virtual and imagined.

This crumbling away of material reality in favour of a 'psychical reality' (Freud 1919/2003) connects with the aspect of the uncanny which is to do with intellectual uncertainty, and the blurring of fantasy and reality. For Freud, 'an uncanny effect often arises... when a symbol takes on the full function and significance of what it symbolises' (150). Kristeva (1991) expands on this aspect of the uncanny:

In other words, the sign is not experienced as arbitrary but assumes a real importance. As a consequence, the material reality that the sign was commonly supposed to point to crumbles away to the benefit of imagination, which is no more than 'the over-accentuation of psychical reality in comparison with material reality'. (Kristeva 1991, 186)

This lies at the heart of the 'intellectual uncertainty' which is an 'essential condition for the emergence of a sense of the uncanny' (Jentsch 1908). In the context of a 'distance' education, the many digital signs and traces of the university – its virtual learning environments – come to take over the 'full function' of the institution they symbolise. The university's online manifestations *become* the university. As a 'place [it] doesn't exist'. This 'edgelessness' of the university, foregrounded in a recent Demos report (Bradwell 2009), renders it uncanny in a way which may be generative of new and vital approaches to re-thinking the task of teaching. The destabilised, haunted online 'classroom', becomes what Barnett (2007) – writing within a context which is not explicitly concerned with the digital – calls 'a fluid space... [where] there are few, if any fixed compass bearings' (71).

What would a digital pedagogy look like which engaged purposefully with this fluid, haunted space? It would be one defined, perhaps, by remoteness and spectrality – one in which the material 'distancing' of teacher from student and student from student was not seen as a question of compromise (distance learning as 'second best') but as a positive embrace of a different kind of presence, one which opens up new ways of defining and re-thinking 'contact'. As Ascott (2003) has written:

It's not simply that many colleges are haunted by the ghosts of culture past, but that apparitions of the future are emerging on every screen, in every network. These apparitions are the constructions of distributed mind, the coming-into-being of new forms of human presence, half-real, half-virtual, new forms of social relationships, realized in telepresence, set in cyberspace. (18; quoted in Kocchar-Lindgren 2009, 8)

Such an approach would turn away from digital environments which attempt to contain the pedagogical encounter within an online replication of the bounded classroom – we might see the closed spaces of the conventional virtual learning environment as working to limit the extent to which online learning spaces are *allowed* to be uncanny, volatile, disorienting (Cousin 2005; Bayne 2008b). An uncanny digital pedagogy concerned with ghostliness of place would take a confident stance toward its own 'otherness', using the multiple, disaggregated and public nodes of the read-write web as places to conduct its business.<sup>1</sup>

## Fragmented bodies

These distributed, disaggregated models of engagement seen on the social web are defined by fragmentation, by a flexible, fluid movement between groups and applications which requires individuals to re-make their identities – to double themselves – every time they register for a new network, a new service. In this doubling we at times see the ontological dissonance of the uncanny, as ‘selfhood’ across the network becomes ‘duplicated, divided and interchanged’ (Freud 1919/2003, 141). For example:

Facebook user profiles are obvious constructs: there is truth in them, but invariably artifice as well. Thus, to some, these digital selves become fractured, confused reflections of a person, never wholly unreal, but never wholly real either – a seeming half-truth. (Boon and Sinclair 2009, 103)

On registering on a social site, we are invariably invited – almost as a first step – to ‘upload an image’, to duplicate ourselves visually in a piece of identity work which invites artifice and play as much as ‘authenticity’ or its semblance. In that our images and profiles – and, in more visual environments, our avatars – represent a ‘re-embodiment’ within the terms of the digital, we scatter our ‘bodies’ across the web where they gain a kind of independence as nodes for commentary, connection and appropriation by others into new networks and new configurations. These versions of ourselves become representative of uncanny ‘embodied absence’ as much as ‘disembodied presence’ (Hook 2005); our actual and immediate activity on the network at any given time is less important than the presence of our representation, our ‘ghost’.

These kinds of doublings might be cast in Cartesian terms as having to do with the de-coupling of body from soul. For Hook, as for Boon and Sinclair (2009), they embrace ‘problems of human authenticity and essence, of singularity. In that which is uncanny then we have an affront to the hoped-for uniqueness of soul’ (697). The embodied absences of the social web involve us in an uncanny movement toward the posthuman, toward a kind of death, in that we:

... find the de-coupling of body and soul disconcerting: ‘the human’ after all, might be said to be one way of thinking about the joint presence of these factors in a single, stable ontological form. An uncanniness of presence is experienced when we perceive qualities of the human body, aspects of its ‘figural form’ occurring in the absence of an associated subjectivity. (Hook 2005, 700)

For Hook – writing about public monuments rather than digital ‘ghosts’ – such manifestations of the uncanny interpellate us, asking us to take up a particular subject position which has ideological implications. They ask us to impute a ‘psychological presence’ which resolves the ontological dissonance induced by the de-coupling of ‘body’ and ‘soul’, and in doing so neutralises the vision of the ‘double’ as an uncanny ‘harbinger of death’ (Freud 1919/2003, 142). Hook draws an explicit connection between this imperative to ‘close the gap’ and Lacan’s (1977) ‘l-function’, which provisionally brings together ‘the disturbing incoherence and/or fragmentation of the *corps morcelé* [the fragmented body] into an imaginary whole’ (701).

For such doubling and disaggregation puts us ‘at odds with ourselves’ (Royle 2003, 6), or in Kristeva’s (1991) terms makes us ‘strangers to ourselves’, in ways that disturb our ontological horizons and defamiliarise previously familiar social practices. Barnett (2007) – while approaching the idea from within a different philosophical framework – uses similar terms while seeing the notion of ‘rendering strange’ as having distinct pedagogical advantages. As a learner in higher education, the student:

... is in a process in which she is, in a sense, being estranged from herself... The student is asked to submit to the strangeness of new worlds opening before her. If they were not strange worlds, there would be question marks over whether we were in the presence of higher education. (Barnett 2007, 147)

Thus there is a sense in which the digital uncanny reflects the ontological disturbances opened up by a genuine higher education. Digital ‘spectrality’, while troublesome, also offers us opportunities to re-think higher education teaching in new and enthralling ways.

### Time ‘out of joint’ and text out of place

There is more, however, to the notion of ghostliness and doubling within the context of the digital than new ways of representing embodied selfhood – for ghosts are to do with disjunctions of *time*, as well as *body*:

The ghost... is a figure who is both without body and out of their own natural time, and hence unsettling on two counts. The uncanny disturbs the ego in its relationship to body and time. It is a response... to a breakdown of a sort of implicit natural order, be it that of history (the separateness of past and present) or of embodiment (the lack of co-ordination between body and soul). (Hook 2005, 698)

The problematising of the ‘natural’ relation between past and present is a key issue for hauntology, which supplants their distinctness with the notion of ‘a general temporality made up of the successive linking of presents identical to themselves and contemporary with themselves’ (Derrida 1994, 17). Taking as a point of reference Hamlet’s exclamation that ‘The time is out of joint’, hauntology explores the theme of ‘temporal disjuncture’:

Hauntology isn’t about the return of the past, but about the fact that the origin was already spectral. We live in a time when the past is present, and the present is saturated with the past. Hauntology emerges as a crucial – cultural and political – alternative both to linear history *and* to postmodernism’s permanent revival. (k-punk 2006, no page)

Working virtually has already been described as working within a ‘rolling present’ (Hoeffling 2003) – the multiple synchronicities of online communication play on this notion of temporal disjuncture, of many ‘nows’. Thus an uncanny digital pedagogy concerned with reflecting on, and playing with, the hauntological notion of temporal disjuncture would deliberately spread itself across multiple orientations toward the synchronous and the asynchronous – working at one point within the securely asynchronous discussion board, at another with the chaotic textual tapestry of the real-time text chat, and at another with technologies like *Twitter*, the synchronicity of which lies somewhere between the two. It would also play, reflexively and unapologetically, with the various modes of bodily representation within the digital, working across many spectral manifestations – text, video, voice, avatar. In doing so it would consciously explore different modes of disaggregation and re-aggregation online, working creatively with the fragmented, spectral texts and presences which constitute the network. For example, the MSc in e-learning at the University of Edinburgh assesses part of its programme through the ‘submission’ of a ‘lifestream’. ‘Lifestreams’ are digital environments which aggregate an individual’s activities across multiple social sites (*Twitter*, blogs, social bookmarking and so on) into a single digital artefact. Asking students to submit lifestreams as assessed elements of a programme is an attempt provisionally to capture something of the ‘spectrality’ of their digital existences. As an assessment strategy, it works with the idea of the learning process as volatile, disorienting and invigorating, and it also stretches conventional assessment frameworks to their limits. In defamiliarising the familiar through creative pedagogical appropriation of the digital, teaching becomes newly, and productively, strange.

Further, the traditionally close identification of scholarship and teaching with print literacy (Goodfellow and Lea 2007; Carrington 2005; Eisenstein 1980) and the familiarity of that relation, means that the domain of the digital text is wide open to new possibilities for an uncanny pedagogy; it makes established social practices surrounding the generation and exchange of academic

texts unfamiliar and strange. For the digital text, in its many forms, is volatile where print is stable, fragmented where print is bound, distributable where print is fixed, and often doubtful in its mode of authorship, in contrast to the tight association of author and text within the print mode (Poster 2001; Bayne 2006).

An uncanny digital pedagogy would therefore undertake creative engagement with these new and often difficult textual environments, in a way which plays on the – often disturbing – ‘loosening’ of the tight relation between text and author online and in a way which, again, poses challenges to stable assessment orthodoxies. Single group marks for collectively-produced wikis, for example, challenges the individuating assumptions of assessment practices informed by print convention. Inviting students to submit work in the form of web essays and hypertexts is hardly new in higher education (see Landow 1997; Carter 2003; Shin and Cimasko 2008), yet in their breaching of the ‘rules’ of spatiality (Coyne 2005, 7) and their repositioning of the relation between text and reader, such artefacts offer exhilarating and rigorous means for ‘making strange’ our understanding of the way in which academic text relates both to space and to conventional notions of authorship. Such textual practices, still marginal within the university, defamiliarise literacy conventions which have long been embedded within our pedagogical practices, introducing awkwardnesses and uncertainties which invite us ‘to question, to experience, in strangely new ways’ (Royle 2003, 14).

### **In conclusion**

This paper has reflected upon the themes of uncertainty, haunting, anxiety and the uncanny within the context of learning and teaching online. In doing so, it has attempted to begin the task of outlining how teachers and students might use the notion of the uncanny as a way of thinking through some of the more radical and, ironically, enlivening implications of digitality for our academic practice. Thinking the uncanny in these terms gives a positive inflection to the themes of deathliness, ghostliness, troublesomeness and uncertainty, one which meshes well with contemporary thinking on the nature and purpose of higher education. When viewed through the lens of the digital uncanny, the established certainties of our social practices relating to how we are positioned toward our institutions, our texts, our own experience of ‘being’ as teachers and students, becomes new, rich and strange. This paper has attempted a beginning in thinking about how we might, in practice, go about forging generative digital pedagogies based on a theory of the uncanny. Such pedagogies work positively, creatively and energetically with the new, disorienting spaces presented to us by digital mediation. Within this view the digital represents not an enhancement to, extension of, or substitute for familiar, offline practices. Rather, it is a *privileged* mode, one in which new ontological positionings, and new dispositions toward teaching and toward knowledge might be explored and delighted in.

### **Notes**

1. For an example, see the ‘E-learning and digital culture’ course – part of the MSc in e-learning at the University of Edinburgh – <http://digitalculture-ed.net/>.

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