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Spectra of Transcommunication: A Survival Story after Raudive and Derrida

By Luka Bekavac

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Spectra of Transcommunication: A Survival Study after Raudive and Derrida

Luka Bekavac

The article analyzes instrumental transcommunication (ITC) as a widespread cultural practice of representing the afterlife. A brief introductory survey of the phenomenon focuses on its history, its conceptual and technological development, its impact on the world of art, and various types of criticism it provoked. Belief in the possibility of communicating with the dead is further explored from a cognitive and psychoanalytic angle: the “specters” of ITC are traceable to a specific interplay of apophenia or pareidolia and the work of mourning (as defined by Freud and critically developed by Abraham and Torok). In the concluding section, ITC’s ontological premises—”realism” of the photographic image and equating voice with life—are examined in the light of Derrida’s “hauntology” and Barthes’s theory of photography: if signifying processes are irreducible to the singularity of a living presence, then writing, photography, and sound recordings actually “spectralize” the living instead of reanimating or documenting the dead.

Keywords: Barthes, Derrida, hauntology, instrumental transcommunication, mourning, photography, spectrality, text



“Hades-Association”¹

Instrumental transcommunication (ITC) has a prominent position amongst contemporary cultural and artistic representations of spectrality and the afterlife: it allows the notion of communicating with the dead to survive, ostensibly making its peace with modern technology, dispensing with arcane knowledge and macabre theatrics traditionally associated with spiritualism. It is difficult to convey a general impression of its eccentricity, datedness, and occasional genuine numinosity without providing a brief survey of its history, its conceptual and technological development, and its impact on the world of art. However, this overview will have an additional purpose. Reading through any

account of ITC occurrences of the last fifty years inevitably leads to a more comprehensive insight, beyond purely anecdotal data: precisely because this activity seems to introduce a certain democratization of contact with the “beyond,” enabling anyone to engage in amateur experiments by placing impersonal and often widely available machines in the role of notoriously unpredictable and suspicious mediums, its final effect upon our understanding of death is regressive rather than illuminating.

I will try to reexamine ITC as a hybrid phenomenon brought about by a novel interaction of superstition, science, and mourning: a failed attempt to reconcile ourselves with death, a pursuit of mastery over mourning by delegating its work to external mechanical props, where the instrumental foundation of transcommunication becomes a figurative echo chamber, an elaborate machine for encountering oneself. In this domain of technologically mediated presences, specters of otherworldly entities appear as visual, auditory, or textual documents that are treated as evidence of survival, rationalizing an old belief system and placing it in a framework of empirical testability. Nevertheless, instead of performing a thorough overhaul of those beliefs, this superficial reconstruction only testifies to their obstinate resistance to enlightenment; moreover, it showcases their capability of co-opting the very tools by which science legitimizes itself.

This overriding power is largely based on somewhat naïve but deeply intuitive notions of “realism” of the photographic image and equating voice with life and presence. Following a route through poststructuralism and deconstruction, it is possible to reevaluate the idea of “documents” of survival from the vantage point of Derrida’s and Barthes’s works, exploring their revised concepts of sign, subject, and death. Losing their status of proof (or even mimetic representation) of life, the distinctly non-human processes of signification, irreducible to the singularity of a living presence, ultimately reveal themselves as the eminent site of spectral emergence.

Attempting this itinerary seems somewhat reckless without addressing the problem of an appropriate theoretical approach. A scholar’s limited accountability tends to be taken for granted in the matters of the supernatural or the paranormal, but not only because of the inherently elusive subject. Every effort in presenting

a coherent genesis of a paraphenomenon seems doomed to failure on account of the absolute heterogeneity of the field: its history lacks not only comforting academic certainties such as clear timelines, canonical works, and authoritative commentaries, but also the barest methodological consistence. A multitude of mutually exclusive or unrelated approaches, coupled with the absence of a shared technical, scientific, or theoretical background, seems to render a common object of investigation less uniform through each subsequent development, thwarting all possibility of exhaustive description.

But the problem might be structural instead of pragmatic:

There has never been a scholar who really, and as scholar, deals with ghosts. A traditional scholar does not believe in ghosts – nor in all that could be called the virtual space of spectrality. There has never been a scholar who, as such, does not believe in the sharp distinction between the real and the unreal, the actual and the inactual, the living and the non-living. (Derrida, *Specters* 12)

Therefore, our viewpoint itself could be the ultimate obstacle: theory will be unable to grasp the supernatural until it breaches the divide between rigid binary oppositions. I will return to Derrida's obvious implication—spectrality as a new addition to the network of quasi-transcendental terms (supplement, *différance*, pharmakon ...) and deconstruction as the only field more or less capable of accommodating it—but I will start elsewhere, at a different edge of science, a domain where organized study of death and “survival” resulted in an awkwardly modernized representation of the afterlife.

Instrumental transcommunication has had a long and complicated history. The term is usually attributed to Ernst Senkowski:

The broad spectrum of purely mediumistic transcommunication phenomena ... has been expanded and confirmed since the introduction of electromagnetic telecommunication by a wealth of ‘anomalous’ events within electro-technical devices and systems.... [I]his novel linking of psychic and physical components produces something which embodies information

potential and may be termed instrumental transcommunication. (A1)

Once an obscure backwater of contemporary spiritualism, it has recently been thoroughly mapped out (albeit in a decidedly labyrinthine way) through a multitude of critical analyses and book-length studies, online multimedia archives, and various cultural reappropriations.² The “fad” of communicating with spirits via radio or tape had its heyday in the third quarter of the twentieth century, but its rhizomatic tradition, hidden from the public sphere, stretches back at least into the 1900s, encompassing a variety of names, incidents, and techniques. Some of the early ITC occurrences appear accidental, relegated to anecdotes in a broader and more sober context (such as Vladimir Bogoraz’s phonograph recordings of Siberian shamanistic ceremonies); the sheer bizarrerie of others makes them easily dismissible. A distinct place in the story of premeditated experiments belongs to Tesla and Edison: although neither produced any recordings, both believed that the new technologies could open hitherto unavailable channels toward the afterlife, unintentionally providing a semblance of scientific pedigree to succeeding researchers and their devices (for example, Franz Seidl’s “Psychophon” or George Meek’s “Spiricom”). Projects like these had a degree of rigor about them, but were generally marred by forced conclusions, incongruous cosmologies, and spiritualist jargon.

The first half of the century was spattered with isolated reports on recorded voices of “discarnate beings” (Attila von Szalay’s 1940s attempts gained a certain notoriety), but they only retroactively achieved the status of “precedents” after Friedrich Jürgenson, a Swedish painter and opera singer, discovered hiss, static, and a male voice speaking in Norwegian in the middle of bird-song recordings made around his forest hut in June 1959. A month later, the control lamp on his recorder started flashing again in complete silence; playback revealed voices in English and German, declaring that they were watching him and prompting him to continue recording. What followed is an uncanny, partially confessional story, described in his *Voice Transmissions With the Deceased* (1967), that established the trademarks of the *Tonbandstimmen* phenomenon: very brief, deformed messages from unseen sources, inaudible during the recording, but recognizable on

tape beneath a layer of noise; radical polyglossia and agrammaticality of voices, resembling multilingual poetry or oracular discourse, delivered in an agitated rhythm; manifestation of deceased acquaintances, celebrities, and non-human entities; futile attempts to establish a common technical vocabulary (“caverns,” “radars,” “Porta nuova,” “Central Investigation Station”); glimpses of the “postmortem” level, marked by the dissolution of earthly, “standard” time.

This could have been a dead end: a convoluted delusion, a work of weird fiction at best, but ITC history saw its decisive moment when a Latvian-born writer and former Jungian psychologist decided to visit Jürgenson and examine the recording process. His name was Konstantin Raudive, and he had the questionable honor of briefly lending his name to what was dubbed “Raudive voices.” *Breakthrough* (1971), the dramatic English rendering of his *Unhörbares wird hörbar (Inaudible Becomes Audible, 1968)*, inspired a flood of efforts to capture spirits on tape, in spite of its forbiddingly ascetic content: it predominantly consisted of arduous transcripts of experiments (he collected and analyzed about 25,000 voices by 1968), offering hundreds of pages of polyglot sentences and their translations. Raudive strove to approach the matter systematically, scrutinizing his recordings and seeking explanations from physics, psychology, and electronic engineering, and while his results were never properly scientific, his method convinced a number of people of the authenticity of the tapes.

The voices were soon democratically renamed “electronic voice phenomena” (EVP), gaining access to new media and demanding new terminology: we have reached the true age of instrumental transcommunication. For those who accepted their existence, signals from the other side left no avenue unexplored: communications came through radios and telephones, self-made equipment and Morse code transmissions, and distorted images encrypted in the TV snow, finally invading computers, as described in Ken Webster’s *The Vertical Plane* (1989). With the advance in technology, reports became progressively outlandish: the Harsch-Fischbach couple pursued multimedia links to the deceased not only from Earth but from other dimensions as well. Their most

persistent contact was “Swejen Salter,” a female scientist who claimed to have died in a parallel world in 1987; her detailed descriptions of its cosmology, science, and everyday life, accompanied by images and sound, were subsequently revealed as paraphrases of Philip José Farmer’s 1971 novel *To Your Scattered Bodies Go*. The sepulchral décor of traditional spiritualism reformed itself accordingly: romantic, tormented ghosts, darkened rooms, hauntings, and ectoplasm faded into experimental sessions, radio static, grainy video images, and two-way transmissions with “scientists” from beyond, or even their institutions, with befitting names: “Timestream,” “Co-Zeit,” “2109,” “ABX Juno.”

The Internet and affordable digital technologies brought about another significant leap: recording became easier, and an overwhelming amount of online data facilitated the appearance of a large network (from organizations with their magazines, conferences, and rules of work and etiquette to a multitude of independent experimenters).³ Plausibility issues that plagued the previous generations proliferated as well, and the majority of devotees remained attached to the 1960s technical and conceptual level: the emphasis on community building and self-help has obstructed the genuine scientific impetus that propelled some of the early ITC development.

Wide awareness of the possibility of electronic transcommunication ultimately created a peculiar field between ancient necromancy and fringe science, seemingly transforming nineteenth-century mediumship, conjuring, and ghost photography into an area of organized research, constrained by certain criteria. But from the early days of radio to wireless networks, a clearly recognizable mechanism of Gramscian articulation was at work: new mythologies of the afterlife deftly found a niche in every illuminating scientific development, updating antiquated notions of spirituality and life after death. Emerging technology invalidated the imagery of a bygone era, supplanting it with another, more “scientific” one, while simultaneously opening itself to various types of “unorthodox” use and philosophical, religious, or emotional investment that linked it to beliefs predating its arrival, finally sinking into the paradigm it sought to overcome.

“I Hear the Echo”

If the entire technological interface of ITC works as an upgraded tool of a primeval urge to reconnect with the world of the dead, inducing the return of the repressed and offering a new vocabulary for the unconscious, the very root of the phenomenon could be approached via psychoanalysis. I will try to summarize some typical responses to ITC, both negative (criticism from technological and ethical viewpoints) and positive (various appropriations in the world of art), focusing on certain elements found in both: the power of the psyche to subject raw sensory input to its needs, leading to a new understanding of contemporary technological necromancy as an elaborate conduit for mourning, a communication apparatus masking what is fundamentally a soliloquy.

At first, ITC inevitably attracted almost exclusively negative attention: its entire history could be traced through attempts to dismiss the phenomenon as a symptom of disease, a malicious hoax, or a byproduct of technological incompetence, since transmissions ranging from airplane communications to intercoms and mobile phones, including TV and radio, tend to “emerge in the same VLF waveband, frequently producing stray signals,” which are “often very garbled and therefore ideal raw material for acoustic projection” (Banks 80). Senkowski described the conditions required for proper ITC (B-9.1-8), taking into account some of these objections and referring to experiments held within Faraday cages, but subsequent attempts to recreate ITC phenomena in controlled conditions (Barušs, “An Experimental,” “Failure”), using tape recording with detuned radios and random text generators, failed to produce strictly “paranormal” results, despite the occurrence of certain inexplicable side effects.

Raudive’s dubious methodology inspired some serious essays as well, and David J. Ellis published a book-length study (1978) after several years of research. ITC circles regarded his unbiased approach and guarded conclusions as a betrayal, claiming that the investigation and its results were doctored by the Society for Psychical Research, but some glaring problems were undeniable. He organized a series of listening tests, introducing participants to

Raudive's best recordings, but eventually published all interpretations of the messages (Raudive kept only his final conclusions, often compromising the experiments by offering the solutions in advance, thereby significantly limiting the possibility of objective listening): the results oscillated considerably, showing that "polyglossia" sometimes simply betrayed an experimenter's inability to understand a given language. Eliminating mediums in favor of technology didn't exclude arbitrariness: scraps of static-ridden transmissions, devoid of context, courted projections and allowed for suspiciously convenient explanations. Keil recognized a continuous passage in German as a Sunday Mass (290), which Raudive dissected into small segments, obliterating their context and attributing fanciful meanings to the remaining "polyglottic" fragments in five languages ("benötigen" becoming "Goethe," for example). An even more poignant example is provided by a sequence of short, ominous messages in German, French, English, and Russian, transcribed by Raudive as "Glaube du, Cedin / Romani Nimowald zamuchils / Ich folgu you tonight / bona cui," meaning, approximately, "Believe you, Cedin / Romani Nimowald is tormented to death / I follow you tonight / (not interpreted)." Ellis's collaborators reconstructed the text (including parts not interpreted by Raudive) as a truncated recording of Radio Luxembourg's late night music show: "Hello, this is Kid Jensen, reminding you about *Dimensions*. (Later on tonight on 208: soft rock, hard rock, jazz and blues.) It's all for you, tonight, at one o'clock" (Ellis 61, 96-7).

The problem of identifying patterns in random data and straddling the line between science and psychosis opened the phenomenon to a new wave of examination in the world of experimental, conceptual, and sound art. C. M. von Hausswolff curated several exhibitions on or inspired by Jürgenson's work and released his own *Operations of Spirit Communication* LP (2000), and the Ash International record label published two EVP-related CDs, emphasizing the inherent qualities of the voices as *objets trouvés*, comfortably situating the phenomenon within the late 1990s sound culture that embraced the aesthetics of "documentary" or "non-music" releases.

The turn of the millennium certainly wasn't the first point of contact between ITC and other creative endeavors. There are

obvious similarities between Raudive's work and the cut-up and fold-in methods of W. S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin, not only in their pragmatic aspects but also in some of their theoretical ambitions (a "breakthrough" into a spectral timeless zone, where the future – or the past? – leaks through). Furthermore, Burroughs himself has written on EVP, in 1976, pointing out "stylistic similarity between the voices recorded by Raudive, dream speech, schizophrenic speech, words spoken in delirium, and cut-ups" (68). Burroughs didn't dispute the existence of voices, but he dismissed Raudive's claims of contact with the dead, striving to suit his own preoccupations: "maybe we are all walking around under a magnetic dome of prerecorded word and image, and Raudive and the other experimenters are simply plugging into the prerecording" (74), the voices being a mere "backplay of recordings stored in the memory banks of the experimenters" (73). His final verdict was somewhat ambiguous, betraying Burroughs's doctrine of the "electronic revolution": "the best safeguard against the abuse of such knowledge is widespread dissemination" (72).

The International Necronautical Society, Tom McCarthy's and Simon Critchley's complex hybrid of semi-anonymous collective art (evoking a long history of media manipulation, from Italian Futurism to *Neue Slowenische Kunst*) and earnest experiment in theoretical praxis (building on the foundations of Situationist International and a variety of poststructuralist influences), was also certainly – albeit somewhat ironically – inspired by EVP research. Their "Founding Manifesto" reads:

we shall take it upon us, as our task, to bring death out into the world. We will chart all its forms and media: in literature and art, where it is most apparent; also in science and culture, where it lurks submerged but no less potent for the obfuscation. We shall attempt to tap into its frequencies—by radio, the internet and all sites where its processes and avatars are active. [...] Death moves in our apartments, through our television screens, the wires and plumbing in our walls, our dreams. Our very bodies are no more than vehicles carrying us ineluctably towards death. We are all necronauts, always, already. (McCarthy et al. 53)

However, Nicolas Bourriaud's introduction to a collection of their

“documents” points to a favorite topic of Raudive’s detractors: “Literature, art, and philosophy represent different forms of *intelligence* – forms that, in the end, can probably be traced back to a single practice: the focused contemplation of the starry sky that seeks out patterns in it. The INS aims to reunite with the zodiac” (24). From da Vinci’s *Treatise on Painting* to the works of William Gibson, pattern recognition endures as a site of ghostly manifestations, and the recent case of the Unfavorable Semicircle YouTube channel perfectly showcases the power generated by an endless flow of anonymous, seemingly random data devoid of context: its air of impenetrable mystery coupled with a vaguely malevolent tone inspired fanatical dedication in its followers and interpreters, even leading to some theories similar to early EVP explanations (extraterrestrial probes, communication attempts by a superior artificial intelligence etc.). This mechanism surpasses the confines of ITC, of course, but the entire ITC culture could be perceived as a global community of its unsuspecting victims.

Rorschach Audio, a series of articles and lectures by Joe Banks, strives to explain EVP as a species of apophenia or pareidolia (perceiving connection, sometimes even grave significance, in haphazard and unrelated auditory or visual stimuli): professional recordings of speech would never elicit “paranormal” explanations, but “the fog of noise that degrades these signals still seduces some people into suspending disbelief” (Banks 78).⁴ ITC experiments usually demand the introduction of noise (tape hiss, wind or surf, radio interference, TV snow, random data generators), not as an extraneous element, but as the substance of phenomena to be provoked or documented, and while one might condemn this as a deliberate inducing of apophenia, ITC proponents call upon the concept of stochastic resonance: adding noise to a weak signal actually improves it, enhancing it and pushing it across the threshold of audibility, the implication being that the voices do exist but need a “carrier frequency” to make themselves heard. Noise, therefore, actually becomes the new “medium”: a volatile conducting body, simultaneously undermining the credibility of a phenomenon and enforcing itself as the only channel of its emergence.

White noise—theoretically, a “space” where all sound-events of a given frequency band coexist, a “source” that generates the

totality of syntagmatic possibilities—becomes a contemporary, technically improved crystal ball. The vaguely atavistic ITC rite of noise decryption stems directly from archaic forms of divination like crystal gazing or hydromancy: it is a method of “diving within,” alleviating the constraint of the conscious self, bound to a linear spacetime continuum. Obsidian mirrors, water, or viscera in the clairvoyant’s hands basically represented primitive abstract “screens,” devised to engender hypnotic effects: they provided an opening not to another dimension but to the seer’s interior. Significantly, practically every EVP narrative eventually leaps from the pledges of objectivity to the experimenter’s admission of “hearing” the voices directly, without the aid of recording machines, materializing from the crackling fireplaces, passing cars, or even their own breathing. The failure to decide whether EVP is an “internal” or an “external” phenomenon persistently shadows its research as well: even the harsh critics of “transcommunication,” who reluctantly accept the existence of a small percent of clearly audible and inexplicable voices, tend to attribute them to someone’s psychokinetic input, not to the malfunctioning equipment. The “guides” that ease the contact with the beyond (Jürgenson’s “Spidola,” Raudive’s “Lena,” Estep’s “Styhe”) create a new level of complications, opening the phenomenon to a range of explanations from possession and channeling to paracusia and schizophrenia. I will stop to consider a specific version of this problem, uniting three themes—“haunting,” connecting to “deeper levels” of oneself, and noise as a projecting screen—under the name of mourning.

The decisive role of coping with loss has been recognized by ITC believers and skeptics alike, but the work of mourning—as a distinct psychological process, described by Freud in “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917)—remains a relatively uncharted part of this field. Freud defines mourning as a gradual process of relinquishing a given amount of energy bound to a dead or withheld object, in order to redirect it and form a new cathexis. Melancholia, on the other hand, as a pathological substitute for mourning, draws the libido back into the ego, hindering its displacement and prompting the identification of the ego with the object. Additionally compromising the objectivity of recording

technologies, activating mechanisms of self-deception, feeding on the combination of spiritualism and apophenia, failure of mourning becomes the focal point of the entire ITC enigma.

“Ghosts: the concept of ... the completely other, dead, living in me,” writes Derrida (“Deaths” 41-2), sourcing his “definition” from the work of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, whose psychoanalytic theory, heavily informed by phenomenology and linguistics, places “phantoms” in the center of transgenerational trauma. Their critical revisions of Ferenczi’s and Freud’s concepts of introjection and melancholia provided the foundation for a different pathology of mourning, based around the notions of incorporation and the crypt. “Normal” mourning enables us to interiorize, assimilate, and finally overcome the dead, keeping our integrity at the expense of their memory. Refusing to mourn and cherishing the shadow of the lost object, we falsely preserve the other-as-other and strengthen the cathexis that binds us to the deceased: “Faced with the impotence of the process of introjection (gradual, slow, laborious, mediated, effective), incorporation is the only choice: fantasmatic, unmediated, instantaneous, magical, sometimes hallucinatory” (Derrida, “*Fors*” xvii). Incorporation conceals an “open wound” of trauma, shut off in a crypt within the ego, “an ‘artificial’ unconscious lodged like a prosthesis, a graft in the heart of an organ, within the *divided self*” (xiii), where it will continue to disrupt us, seemingly leaving our topography intact.

Derrida’s claim that “the incorporated dead, which one has not really managed to take upon oneself, continues to ... ventrilocate through the ‘living’” (*Ear* 57-8) leads to the crucial point of ITC’s relation to the unconscious:

Reconstituted from the memories of words, scenes, and affects, the objectal correlative of the loss is buried alive in the crypt as a full-fledged person, complete with its own topography. [...] Sometimes in the dead of night, when libidinal fulfillments have their way, the ghost of the crypt comes back to haunt the cemetery guard, giving him strange and incomprehensible signals, making him perform bizarre acts, or subjecting him to unexpected sensations. (Abraham and Torok, *Shell* 130)

Previous lines could almost be read as a description of ITC’s inception. Pursuit of contact with the deceased is a refusal to

mourn, an escape from the burden of loss, oblivious to the greatest ethical and rhetorical problem of eulogy, reiterated in Derrida's funeral orations: speaking of the deceased, we keep alive the deceptive impression that the dead, surviving in us, also somehow still live as themselves. However, both "normal" and "pathological" mourning fail to establish a true rapport with the deceased: if mourning is successful, I terminate any real relationship I had with the other; if it is not, I basically mourn myself to death, allowing the other's identity to overtake me. Therefore, every address to the dead, delivered as if they were still here, necessarily remains a dialogue with oneself.

Banks describes EVP as a "positive feedback loop" (82): a certain notion of the afterlife apophenically generates an ITC illusion, enabling the experimenter to treat pareidolia as evidence of survival. The hidden essence of this process is noise: pure synchrony, as if pouring out from the unconscious itself, blurring the line between the self and the other, making the illusion of contact plausible. Noise and the unconscious share a "panoptic" quality: both submit to diachronic or syntagmatic elaboration only theoretically, essentially remaining an atemporal "pool" of phenomena rather than an articulated chain of messages. The same feature correlates the unconscious with Saussure's *langue* as a virtuality that contains every possible combination of elements, as opposed to their delimited actualizations in *parole*. This implies a different temporality as well: the anachrony of a disarticulated "time out of joint" collapsing into a spectral space.⁵ "Before knowing whether one can differentiate between the specter of the past and the specter of the future ... one must perhaps ask oneself whether the *spectrality effect* does not consist in undoing this opposition" (Derrida, *Specters* 48).

Noise/language/unconscious, then, would be a space in which the self could disappear, or another one appear, in the precise manner required by the pathology of incorporation. "The spectrogenic process corresponds therefore to a paradoxical *incorporation*.... [O]ne engenders some ghost by *giving them a body*. Not by returning to the living body ... but by incarnating the latter in *another artifactual body, a prosthetic body*" (157-158). The experimenters' belief that the voices occasionally come from

“within” is a graphic manifestation of the other-in-me syndrome transferred to acoustics. The inability to recognize this symptom sometimes creates an interesting EVP-specific *mise en abyme*: experimenters see the spirits themselves as unsuccessful mourners, feeling obliged to help them to accept their own death. It’s not surprising, therefore, that the most prominent figures of ITC—Jürgenson, Raudive, Peter Bander (as described in *Voices From the Tapes*, 1973)—were “initiated” into contact by their closest departed friends or relatives, notably mothers or sisters.⁶ There is a marked strain of repressed grief and suffering in early EVP attempts, and it is only momentarily shocking to find Hitler and other high-ranking Nazi officials among the frequent “guests” of Jürgenson and Raudive, both severely scarred by the World Wars and unable to overcome the looming presence of the Third Reich in the mental landscape of post-1945 Europe.

Symptoms of cryptophoria belong to the domain of pathology and are inaccessible to the ego of the analyzand; nevertheless, some manifestations of ITC culture impress one as missed opportunities for self-analysis. Abraham and Torok recognized cryptonymy, “replacing a word by the synonym of its alloseme” (*Wolf Man* 19), as a symptom of incorporation: vocabulary reassembles itself in order to escape the power of a certain “taboo word,” at the same time channeling its force through the entirety of one’s language. Linguistic manifestations of disturbances in the unconscious are commonplace, but the Wolf Man’s polyglottic “Verbarium” (109-13)—a rewriting of Freud’s case study “From the History of an Infantile Neurosis” (1918)—presents a radical method of scanning the signified of one language in order to extract the signifier of another. The results (*ein Band von sechs*—*siestorka*—sister; *Winter*—*zimoi*—it’s a boy; *Nachtzeit*—*notchu*—not you) bear more than a passing resemblance to Raudive’s procedures of discerning different layers of messages in a single sound. The crucial difference is in the disposition of the observer, of course: the work of transcommunication inscribes these layers instead of describing them, providing a detailed index of what the bereaved “see” in the fog of noise, but recognizing it as the proof of “objectivity” of the phenomenon, not as a cryptic dictionary of one’s failed mourning. Raudive himself openly discounted the influence of the unconscious in EVP, simultaneously ignoring the curious rule that

the messages were assembled only in languages known to the given experimenter, but frequently unknown to the supposed “senders” during their lifetime.

Consequently, if there is no external recipient of the experimenter’s queries, if the “answers” do not come from “another place,” if there is only noise, inviting translation but acting as a literal wall of sound, simply throwing questions and interpretations back at those who presented them, then ITC was and remains instrumental infracommunication: a dialogue with oneself, mirroring of a pool of unrelinquished energy within the self, echo of a crypt exclusive to ourselves, enveloping nothing. The others, living or dead, remain outside of reach.

“You Are Chasing Shadows”

This conclusion will be confirmed on a different level by going further down the theoretical path outlined by Derrida and Barthes. Their semiotic theories provide a strong foundation for exploring one more layer of ITC’s failure to connect to the “other side”: the very “nature” of signs—writing, sound recording, photography, film—prevents us from treating them as material consequences of extra-semiotic entities or events. If signs preclude, rather than provide direct contact with reality or consciousness, ITC can be nothing but a closed space of private fictions; furthermore, the only thing that signs in general do manage to produce will be a particular type of spectrality.

Derrida’s work provides many avenues of thinking about this problem; indeed, his name wasn’t introduced here only because of his explicit investigations into “hauntology” in *Specters of Marx* (1993), or speaking to the dead and the ethics of mourning in *Mémoires for Paul de Man* (1986) and *The Work of Mourning* (2003). If a specter is a “complication” of binary oppositions, a subversion of their clear demarcation lines, a certain *tertium datur* between the extremes, then one can interpret it as a late figuration of life-defying capabilities of signs themselves. In a way, one might read “spectral” as an approximate synonym for “deconstructive,” and when Derrida invokes “another scholar who would finally be capable, beyond the opposition between presence and non-

presence, actuality and inactuality, life and non-life, of thinking the possibility of the specter,” the one who would “know how to address himself to spirits,” and would furthermore “know that such an address is not only already possible, but that it will have at all times conditioned, as such, address in general” (*Specters* 13), it is obvious to whom he is referring. The majority of his early texts, a radical body of work that still inspires new research and generates controversies across the academic community,⁷ deals precisely with the crucial problem of this article: the way that signs and their specific structure change or endanger the categories of classical ontology; more to the point, the irreducible gap between the notion of our “living self” and the signs that are supposed to represent it.

This is a theme that Derrida explored obsessively, from his earliest studies of Edmund Husserl’s theory of writing to his most widely read and debated books, often engaging a broad range of authors (from Plato and Hegel to Bataille and Artaud) and, in the following decades, developing its consequences across an ever-widening field of studies (architecture, justice, animal rights etc.). Bearing in mind the rich layering of Derrida’s analyses, notoriously prone to the “broken telephone” effect when summarized, one could say that they brought about a significant shift in the way that philosophers have traditionally understood the concept of writing, fundamentally changing the extent of mastery over text previously attributed to both authors and readers. Innovative concepts of *différance* and *archi-écriture*, processes that demote the writing Self to an effect (and not cause) of a deeper level of inscription, developed simultaneously with the idea of text as a space of impersonal plurality, neutralization of living presence, “death.”⁸

I will try to analyze the implicit ontological premises of ITC against the backdrop of this semiotic model. Briefly, the “transcommunication” viewpoint holds a) that the voices of the deceased, as received on tape, provide hard evidence that they are, after all, not dead; b) that the objectivity of the photographic image (including television, film, etc.) sent from the deceased effectively annuls their “demised” status; shortly, that the recorded acoustic or visual data, containing sign-representations of the deceased, attest to a form of their survival. The correspondence of signs and death in poststructuralist theory simultaneously clashes and harmonizes with these propositions in unexpected ways.

One of the earliest theoretical conjunctions of mourning, specters, and sign-structures is surprisingly found in a motion picture: Ken McMullen's *Ghost Dance* (1983), where Derrida speaks of Abraham, Torok, and incorporation, connecting it somewhat unexpectedly to the cinematic image itself. Referring to himself (or, rather, his filmed image) as a ghost, Derrida announces that the twentieth-century communication technologies have, instead of putting an end to the reign of phantoms, actually multiplied them *ad infinitum*. This concurs with the previous assessment of the ambiguous role of new technologies in the ITC community and invites an explanation of Derrida's motives for this statement. I will begin by a detour through Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida* (1980), accentuating the points where its themes intersect with the ITC "philosophy." Barthes's work is ineluctable for a particular reason: a number of his more accessible texts, most famously "The Death of the Author" (1967), trace a line of thought in literary theory that closely parallels Derrida's work in philosophy; they are a testament to a time when it was taken for granted that texts do not function as mirrors of the outside world, nor the sediments of the author's consciousness, but as an enigmatic "place" where our common-sense perception of what is "real" (being, essence, self, etc.) disappears, leaving behind only a chimerical screen that demands a wholly different vocabulary.

The ontology of the photographic image bars us from reading it exclusively as a coded text: in its physical and technical constitution, it is a non-metaphoric "certificate of presence" (Barthes, *Camera* 87). We entangle ourselves in a mesh of signifiers attempting to "read" a photograph, translating it into a language of commentary, but it remains, in Peirce's terms, an index, "an emanation of the referent. From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me. [...] A sort of umbilical cord links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze: light, though impalpable, is here a carnal medium" (80-1). This immediate physicality, coupled with temporal dilatation (described by Barthes as the noema of photography, "*ça-a-été*"), brings us closer to a notion of photographic "mediumship." "'This-has-been', and now it's here again": this could be a description of a revenant, and Barthes does find something ectoplasmic in the

photographic sign that “invokes,” “incarnates,” and preserves the dead. The very word *Spectrum*, designating a simulacrum or *eidolon* of the photographed object, “retains, through its root, a relation to ‘spectacle’ and adds to it that rather terrible thing which is there in every photograph: the return of the dead” (9).

Therefore, however “factual,” a photograph does not “immortalize” its referent, but “spectralizes” it, bringing it to a non-place between life and death, synchronizing them in a novel way: “by attesting that the object has been real, the photograph surreptitiously induces belief that it is alive ... but by shifting this reality to the past (‘this-has-been’), the photograph suggests that it is already dead” (79). Spectrality is an intrinsically photographic trait: every photograph is a type of ghost photography, not because it captures ghosts, but because it produces them. That is why Barthes and Derrida regard photography and film as “phantomachias,” mediums that beget specters, creating our images that will remain visible after our departure. Spectrality is conceivable as “the visibility of a body which is not present in flesh and blood,” “a night visibility” (Derrida and Stiegler 115), a specter being “a trace that marks the presence with its absence in advance” (117). Therefore, the very interview I’m quoting from, filmed and then transcribed for its release in print, becomes a locus of spectrogenesis: “At this moment, in this room, night is falling over us. [...] We are already specters of a ‘televised.’ [...] Our disappearance is already here” (115-117).

Hauntology, probably the most widely appropriated term of Derrida’s later career, stems precisely from similar examinations of the inherent liminality of media.⁹ This is not pertinent to visual data only; actually, the whole theoretical complex of hauntology can be read as a tail end of a long and meticulous investigation of the ontology of signs. Derrida’s work is noted for unrelenting analyses of discord between the Cartesian notion of the self as a stable and originary sphere, untainted by representations and the passage of time, and “writing” as a shorthand for all mechanisms of language in a radically Saussurean sense: lack of essence, identity derived from difference, sign-system as a transpersonal artefact, independent from any instance of its “use.” Writing automatically effaces its own empirical coordinates: it can never be an ontological modification of presence, a product of an “I” in a certain “here and

now.” Absence is inseparable from the structure of every sign: “To write is to produce a mark that will constitute a kind of machine that is in turn productive, that my future disappearance in principle will not prevent from functioning” (Derrida, “Signature” 316).

The weight of this sentence cannot be overestimated, particularly in the light of a parascientific theory that claims contact with the beyond on account of certain messages—images, spoken sentences, written texts—taken as signs of life: “The absence of intuition – and therefore of the subject of the intuition – is not only *tolerated* by speech; it is *required* by the general structure of signification ... the death of the writer and/or the disappearance of the objects he was able to describe ... does not prevent a text from ‘meaning’ something. On the contrary, this possibility gives birth to meaning as such” (Derrida, *Speech* 93).

Signs are, consequently, structurally incapable of signifying life: one can use signs to manifest a certain presence, to surround oneself with conventions that provide effects to specific utterances or inscriptions, but these effects remain customary and arbitrary; strictly speaking, the structure of every sign-system erases its capability of “expressing” one’s will, existence, or meaning. Every being is a singular occurrence, an event of existence, and a sign is “never an event, if by event we mean an irreplaceable and irreversible empirical particular. A sign which would take place but ‘once’ would not be a sign” (50). Derrida proposes signatures, proper names, and the pronoun “I” as paradigmatic signs of absence and death: “My death is structurally necessary to the pronouncing of the *I*. [...] The statement ‘I am alive’ is accompanied by my being dead, and its possibility requires the possibility that I be dead” (96-7). Likewise, the repetition of a proper name in the absence of its bearer reduces it to a common noun, a metaphorical tombstone that pronounces one’s transience instead of celebrating one’s singularity. Signatures occur in writing proper, “spectralizing” the living self even more visibly: they are the quintessential marks of “I am already dead.” “The contrary of life is not death (which is a stereotype), but language,” announces Barthes (“Textual” 152), describing Poe’s archetypal talking cadaver: the work of writing permeates and precedes every conceivable form of signifying practice, including the living voice

of a present person. *Specters of Marx* develops this one stage further: “this Ego, this *living individual* would itself be inhabited and invaded by *its own specter*. [...] Ego=ghost. Therefore ‘I am’ would mean ‘I am haunted.’ [...] Wherever there is Ego, *es spuket*, ‘it spooks’” (Derrida 166).

If signs are, therefore, capable only of signifying death, representing the dead, transferring messages from a certain “beyond” of presence or “here-and-now,” then believers in transcommunication might have been right, but not in the way that they expected. The fact that no sign can testify to anyone’s existence, that there are only messages from the dead, that there is nothing but transcommunication, doesn’t mean that one can reach out to the departed and bring them back to life. The indubitable “necromantic” capabilities of signs manifest themselves in infusing life with death rather than in reanimating the dead; signs reveal their inherent spectrality whenever they are invested with the purpose of representing life, “immortalizing” their objects only by making them already dead, therefore immune to dying. Consequently, the privileged area of expertise in any hauntological research would have to be a certain post-essentialist textology, making deconstruction the ultimate and possibly final “science of ghosts.” Within its purview, instrumental transcommunication—a “technology” that enables us to witness death while living—would probably still exist, but one wouldn’t need a tape recorder and deep listening exercises in order to hear the voice of death; it would be quite sufficient to say “I,” here and now.

Notes

1. Section headings are attributed to unidentified voices and quoted from Raudive (115, 278, 284), originally as “Hades-Verein” (English and German), “Echo slyšu” (German and Russian), and “Enas tu purgā” (Latvian).
2. Avery Gordon’s *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (1997) and Jeffrey Sconce’s *Haunted Media* (2000) provide excellent, although very different introductions to the contemporary notions of spectrality. Sconce’s work painstakingly reconstructs the process only hinted at in this paper: a culture’s negotiation with the discourse of modernity, aimed at preserving traditional superstitions. Senkowski’s *Instrumental Transcommunication*

(1995) offers a detailed (if biased) historical and technical overview of the phenomenon from a participant's point of view.

3. Senkowski (G-39.7) lists a number of ITC organizations in a dozen countries, the most prominent being The International Network for Instrumental Transcommunication (INIT), The American Association of Electronic Voice Phenomena (AAEVP, now renamed Association TransCommunication), Verein für Transkommunikations-Forschung (VTF), and Cercle d'études sur la transcommunication – Luxembourg (CETL).

4. Banks has collected and expanded his articles on (or against) EVP in a book-length study (*Rorschach Audio: Art & Illusion for Sound*, 2012), situating them in a wider context of Ernst Gombrich's theory of perception, but simultaneously compromising the effort by extending his "debunking" ambitions to artists (from Cocteau and Burroughs to C. M. von Hausswolff) whose work shares some formal or thematic preoccupations with ITC.

5. In the writings of the INS, death is perceived as a "territory that can be occupied, rather than as a 'moment'" (Bourriaud 12), "a type of space, which we intend to map, enter, colonise and, eventually, inhabit" (McCarthy et al. 53). It is highly significant that their writing persistently conflates cartography with psychogeography, "navigation" actually being a projection into/onto the beyond (the other) in order to see ourselves. Unsurprisingly, Orpheus figures as an archetypal necronaut: principally in his modernized, cinematic guise, as mediated by Jean Cocteau's *Orphée* (1950), habitually referenced by EVP enthusiasts on account of obscure radiophonic messages emitted by a deceased poet, but also because of his central place in Maurice Blanchot's writings on literature and death, most notably *The Space of Literature* (1955), often read as a prefiguration of Derrida's early works.

6. There is a gendered dimension to ITC-related representations of the beyond; in addition to "first contacts," the "guides" (operating less as angelic presences and more as technical assistants) tend to be almost exclusively female. It would be worthwhile to systematically examine this glaring asymmetry in ITC (especially on account of its links to the unconscious), perhaps in other areas of paranormal research as well. Quite apart from these concerns, on a

more empirical note, Sconce (44-50) explicitly connects early spiritualism to women's rights movement: building on Ann Braude's *Radical Spirits* (1989), he offers a convincing interpretation of (alleged) mediums as consciously assumed public personae, enabling women to openly address political issues and advocate social change (albeit acting obliquely, under the mask of someone else's identity).

7. I'm principally referring to *Writing and Difference* (1967), *Of Grammatology* (1967), and *Margins of Philosophy* (1972), Derrida's most influential works. The following edited collections might partially illustrate the scope of that influence and related issues: *Derrida's Legacies: Literature and Philosophy* (Simon Glendinning and Robert Eaglestone, 2008); *The Politics of Deconstruction: Jacques Derrida and the Other of Philosophy* (Martin McQuillan, 2007); *Derrida and the Future of the Liberal Arts: Professions of Faith* (Mary Caputi and Vincent J. Del Casino, Jr., 2013); *Demographies: Thinking (of) Animals after Derrida* (Anne Emmanuelle Berger and Marta Segarra, 2011). Finally, Colin Davis's *Haunted Subjects: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis and the Return of the Dead* (2007), Jodey Castricano's *Cryptomimesis: The Gothic and Jacques Derrida's Ghost Writing* (2001), and David Appelbaum's *Jacques Derrida's Ghost: A Conjuration* (2009) are particularly interesting in the context of themes explored in this article.

8. To quote INS's McCarthy once again: "All code is burial, and to dwell within the space of code is to be already dead" (173); consequently, telecommunications are a "tomb that perhaps permits a double movement, in and out" (176).

9. Hauntology is introduced in the first pages of *Specters of Marx* (10), but its second appearance is closer to the themes pursued here: "the medium of the media themselves ... is neither living nor dead, present nor absent: it spectralizes. It does not belong to ontology, to the discourse on the Being of beings, or to the essence of life or death. It requires, then, what we call, to save time and space rather than just to make up a word, *hauntology*" (63).

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