

# Radio Sorcery: A Resonance-Based Analysis of Contemporary Discourse on Paranormal Experiences

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# Radio Sorcery: A Resonance-Based Analysis of Contemporary Discourse on Paranormal Experiences

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# Abstract

This thesis develops a novel theoretical and methodological approach to the analysis of the processes that shape notions of paranormal experiences between the early 1970s and present days. To do so, it employs concepts of sound and resonance as onto-epistemological tools to trace the relational, ecological and performative dimensions of the paranormal, while exploring how such experiences are narrated and shared. Grounded in an interdisciplinary framework of sound studies, affect theory and agential realism, the research examines the resonances between the embodied and the representational, the experiential and the cultural in accounts of encounters with otherworldly agencies.

Methodologically, the study proposes a resonance-based model derived from the circuitry of a crystal radio receiver, a sonic medium with a crucial importance in the history of the practices and the discourses of the paranormal. This model conceptualises the three basic components of the radio as three methodological principles: the *Antenna*, which examines cultural and contextual factors, the *Tuner*, exploring the dynamics that create the conditions for the paranormal experience, and the *Detector*, which focuses on meaning-making processes of narrativisation, interpretation and cultural transmission. This model is applied to three representative case studies: the 1972 BBC drama *The Stone Tape*, the parapsychological Philip Experiment of the 1970s, and the 2019 online documentary series *Hellier*. These cases illuminate critical themes, such as the listening ecologies involved in accounts of hauntings, the vibratory interactions in performative dynamics of group séances, and the resonance-based processes between onsite paranormal investigations and online countercultural mythmaking.

The research argues that a focus on sound and resonance allows for an understanding of processes often overlooked by ocular-centric analytical tools, and which are largely under researched in the existing academic field. In particular, the proposed methodology shifts attention from the representation of reported entities or phenomena to the interactions, sensations, and narrative practices through which the paranormal is perceived and constructed. It redefines the paranormal not as a fixed object to be analysed for its ontological impossibility, but rather as an emergent and relational process arising from peripheral interactions between bodies, spaces and stories, mediated by resonant processes and embodied auditory interactions. With its resonance-based approach, the study challenges reductionist and rigid distinctions, positioning the paranormal as a lens for examining broader cultural, ecological, and sensory dynamics, providing an alternative methodology that integrates sound studies with cultural analysis to explore the emergence, transmission, and shared understanding of modern forms of paranormal practices.

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# 1. Introduction

This thesis is an investigation of the forms, practices and discourses of what is commonly termed as paranormal experience. It uses the concepts of sound and resonance to trace the processes that make ordinary places and events charged with ghostlore and stories of hauntings. The aim is to construct a novel methodological and theoretical approach to describe and analyse such experiences. Resonance will be at the same time the object of the investigation – by tracing the roles of sonic and vibratory interactions in particular case studies – and the epistemological tool used to understand the processual, relational and performative dynamics that pave the way for the *potentiality* of the paranormal: to describe how such experiences are produced, transmitted, and with what relationships with the affective and ecological dimensions of everyday spaces.

## 1.1 Aims and objectives

The methodological program of this research aims to trace the processual dynamics of the paranormal rising from peripheral and subtle interactions with and within space. The attempt is to construct a non-reductionist analysis that does not establish absolute, ontological cuts between the experiencer, the experience and the experienced, but instead is able to take into account the role of the subjects as much as that of the material reality they are immersed into. And most of all, to trace the crucial importance of the resonance between those two poles, understood as extremes of a continuum which involves chance encounters, expectations, background, feelings, physical agencies, stories, media, communications, culture and nature, all mutually resonating.

More specifically, the main aim of the research – to create a methodology to analyse a discourse on paranormal experiences emerging in the Anglophone West from the early 1970s – can be unpacked into three interrelated questions:

- What are the conditions which coordinate the potentiality of a paranormal agency at work?

- Which processes actualise and capture such potential, leading to the sensation of the supernatural?
- What changes after a place or event has been charged with paranormal meaning?

These questions will direct the analysis of three case studies – described below – that are considered representative examples of different modes of the contemporary paranormal experience. The analysis will be centred around the concepts of sound and resonance as onto-epistemological tools to trace the ecological and relational processes of the paranormal described in the accounts. From an operative point of view, four main research objectives have been identified at the beginning of the project. First, to investigate the role of sonic phenomena and resonance-based processes – both material and discursive – in narratives and reports of paranormal experiences. Second, to rethink such experiences in terms of process, communication and affective interactions with and within the everyday. Third, to analyse in detail the affective and symbolic practices of haunted places and spaces. And fourth, to critically examine how paranormal experiences are explained, made sense of, and collectively shared in contemporary western culture.

The research is conducted on three main case studies, the 1972 BBC TV drama *The Stone Tape*, the so-called Philip Experiment, a parapsychological experiment conducted in the early seventies by the Toronto Society for Psychical Research, and the 2019 online independent documentary series *Hellier*. As the methodology chapter below will highlight, these three case studies will prove useful to trace three fundamental and interrelated aspects of the contemporary paranormal episteme: respectively, the connection between space and haunting, the performative dimension of group séances, and the interaction between onsite investigation and online construction of collective paranormal lore.

## 1.2 The focus on sound and resonance

Sound and resonance are valuable objects of investigation for this research due to the specific role such sensory modalities have in the production of the paranormal

experience described in many accounts. While many representations of the paranormal in fiction as well as real-life accounts are strongly visually connoted – the fading smoke-like form of the ghost, the spectacular phenomena of Victorian Spiritualism, the strange manoeuvres of flying saucers, or the blurred photos of alleged cryptids – sonic events often precede and prepare for the apparitional phenomena, seemingly creating the conditions for the apparition to emerge. For instance, in the trope of the haunted house, the presence of the ghost is hinted by footsteps-like sounds. In the séance, the first means of communication with the spirits are *raps* and *knocks*. Many reported UFO sightings are often preceded by hums and buzzes. Moreover, non-human cries are ‘commonly’ heard in the woods where Bigfoot is believed to lurk. In my view, sound is the dimension that best expresses the relational and processual dynamics of the feeling of the paranormal. Furthermore, the investigation of the auditory dynamics in paranormal accounts will unveil how the supernatural emerges not as an instantaneous encounter irrupting into the everyday, but rather as a gradual process of progressive unsettling of the rational and deterministic understanding of the perceived events towards the construction of a semiotic territory where auditory affordances and interactions produce the sensation of haunting. I will explore how sonorous phenomena are able to irradiate the potentiality of an otherworldly presence in the environment, as a vague and indefinite sensation of doubt, hesitation, possibility.

With my emphasis on the sonic and vibratory I do not aim to demonstrate that other sensory modalities are irrelevant in supernatural experiences. My point instead is that, by following how sounds and vibrations intervene in the production of the paranormal experience it becomes possible to unveil relationalities, movements and processes which might remain hidden when adopting visual-centred analytical tools. In particular, a ‘multimodal’ conceptualisation of resonance will be at the centre of my theoretical and epistemological approach. First, from an *ontological* point of view, as sounds and vibrations are among the phenomena most commonly referred as the triggers of the processes which lead to the feeling of the paranormal. Second, concepts and metaphors related to vibrations and resonance-based processes are also fundamental from a *discursive* point of view, as the vast majority of the representations, interpretations and theorisations that have been developed in western culture in the last two centuries attempt to explain the nature of supernatural communications in

terms of different kinds of waveformed energies, vibratory forces and oscillatory dynamics.

The 'radio' in the title, *Radio Sorcery*, refers to the principal methodological model that will be used in the analysis: a model that operatively translates the principles of sound and resonance by applying the circuitual structure of a crystal radio as onto-epistemological concept. As described in the methodology chapter, the crystal receiver is one of the earliest forms of AM receiver, historically crucial for the development of telecommunications and a device that is recurrently found both as actual tool in paranormal practices and adopted as a metaphor to make-sense, explain and hypothesise on the processes of the paranormal experience.

Through the working concept of radio, it will be possible to trace the specifically relational, interactive and mediated dynamics of sonic perceptions and resonance-based interactions that compose and direct the paranormal events described in the case studies. Regarding the terminology of 'sorcery', on one side it openly connects the resonant approach to the practices of occulture at large, in order to demonstrate the commonalities between most of the instances of the paranormal episteme. On the other, the concept of sorcery is a reference to Deleuze and Guattari's conceptualisation of the sorcerer as the deterritorialising force of becoming:

Sorcerers have always held the anomalous position, at the edge of the fields or woods. They haunt the fringes. They are at the borderline of the village, or *between* villages. [...] The sorcerer has a relation of alliance with the demon as the power of the anomalous (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, p.246)

In the context of this research, therefore, sorcery does not merely refer to the practice of magic in a traditional sense, but rather the resonance-based modes and methodologies to reach the anomalous borders of the semiotic territory of the everyday, manipulating them and at the same time to become modulated by the agencies and intensities experienced there.

### 1.3 Definitions and scope of the research

The choice of the terminology of ‘paranormal’ comes from the need to find a term that clearly denoted a modern conceptualisation of the field, distancing it from religious belief and phenomenologies, and that was broad enough to encompass the whole spectrum of practices and experiences investigated in the research. While it is easy to find, in common parlance, the use of terms such as paranormal, supernatural or otherworldly as synonyms, there are historical and cultural connotations that directed the choice. The notorious scholar Jeff Kripal defines the paranormal as “the sacred in transit from the religious and scientific registers into a parascientific or ‘science mysticism’ register” (Kripal, 2010, p.9). The term therefore connotes a distancing from a religious conceptualisation of the supernatural, towards a connection to modern scientific episteme. The word in fact originates in the early twentieth century within academic circles “as a way of referring to physical or quasi-physical events, often of an outrageous or impossible nature [...], that were believed to be controlled by as yet unknown physical, that is, natural laws” (Kripal, 2010, p.8). Similarly, Hines considers that “[t]he paranormal can best be thought of as a subset of pseudoscience. What sets the paranormal apart from other pseudosciences is a reliance on explanations for alleged phenomena that are well outside the bounds of established science” (Hines, 1988, p.7). The reference to academia and the sciences is also useful, as in my research I intend to explore the complex relationship between paranormal practices, technological innovation and scientific paradigm: crucial discursive dynamics for the historical and cultural positioning of the paranormal.

I here propose a further definition of paranormal, that incorporates the ones outlined above. It is a definition that is inescapably *in progress*, whose aim is not so much to contribute to the academic debate over the meaning of the term, but rather to provide the reader with an orientation towards the main aspects and processes that will drive the analysis of the case studies. With paranormal, I intend to gather the wide spectrum of liminal and peripheral experiences — often related to ecological interactions involving phenomena located somewhere between perception and feeling — that push the experiencer to negotiate and renegotiate the established consensual boundaries of reality, eventually assuming the possibility of an otherworldly, communicative



agency at work. This definition intends to stress a centrality of process, interaction and communication over entities, presences and their representations. Connected to this, the reference to agency is a direct vector towards the principal theoretical and epistemological frameworks that will guide the research: affect theory, agential realism, process philosophy. Moreover, the ambiguity between perception and feeling is intended as a connection to the pre-representational dynamics of such experiences, with particular interest on their affective and atmospheric dimensions. Furthermore, the definition stresses the importance of space and of ecological interactions with and within the environment, as a crucial and particularly fruitful aspect of the research that is going to be conducted. The definition is purposely entity-agnostic, in order to include the whole spectrum of phenomena described in the literature. This, as it will be explored in Chapter 6, is a particularly necessary position with respect to the most recent instances of the discourse, where paranormal researchers themselves often conceptualise a unifying form underlying every supernatural event.

The scope of the research is directed by two other constructive limitations: a diachronic and a socio-geographical one. The study covers a time frame between the early seventies and the present day. The three case studies adopted, in fact, are from 1972 (*The Stone Tape*), between 1972 and 1976 (the Philip Experiment) and 2019 (*Hellier*). As it will be demonstrated throughout the thesis, the choice of this diachronic limitation and the rather unbalanced historical distribution of the case studies have methodological reasons. One of the thesis' main preoccupations is in fact to trace relevant trajectories in the establishment of the most recent instances of paranormal discourse – of which *Hellier* is brought as a representative example. In this sense, however, the research will demonstrate that practices, epistemologies and hermeneutics of contemporary paranormal experiences are deeply rooted in the occultural milieu of the late sixties and early seventies, such as: the shift from psychical research to parapsychology, the rise of New Age movements, the countercultural texts of Philip K. Dick or Robert Anton Wilson, the birth of the so-called Chaos Magick, and the cultural impact of the Fortean research of John Keel or Jacques Vallée, to name a few. I argue that early seventies' occulture – more than any other period in the modern history of the occult – had an influence that is necessary to consider in order to describe how the paranormal is currently understood and practiced.

On one side, therefore, the first two case studies are meant to lay the foundations for the understanding of the contemporary dimension of the paranormal, exemplified by the analysis of *Hellier*. On the other, the research on the three case studies as a whole can be seen as an effort to define the main conceptual features of a specific and consistent season of paranormal discourse, that I consider to be born in the early 1970s and continuing to today, while adapted to the current media and technological episteme. In this sense, three main aspects – that will be analysed in depth in the thesis – contribute to the consideration that the last fifty years can be studied as a (very complex and diversified) whole, in deep connection with the past of the field but presenting important specificities derived from the period's sociocultural, technological and scientific innovations.

First, the period is characterised by the remediation and the secularisation of practices pertaining to occulture and psychical research, between the mid-nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth. For instance, the Victorian séance is found transformed – and somehow abstracted from the excesses of its physical performativity – as means to channel disembodied entities of psychological, archetypical or even alien nature. At the same time, speculative conceptualisations of the spiritual telegraph or radio transmission – typical of the second half of 1800s – are realised in practice from the late 1960s, with radios used as tools for spirit communication (Raudive, 1971). Moreover, the methodologies introduced by the London Society for Psychical Research in late 1800s can be found translated either in the scientific domain of parapsychology or in the on-site explorations of recent practices of paranormal investigation. These are only a few examples of such remediations that will be analysed, in *The Stone Tape* and the Philip Experiment chapters in particular.

Second, the seventies' re-enchantment of the West (Partridge, 2005) brought a new, holistic approach to supernatural phenomena, with the consideration of all paranormal events and entities as pertaining to the same 'nature', often conceived in resonant or vibratory terms (Lethbridge, 1961; Keel, 1970). This approach was initially introduced by the anomalist research of Charles Fort in the 1920s (Fort, 1923) and then rediscovered by neo-Fortean writers such as John Keel or Jacques Vallée, whose ideas will be explored in the *Hellier* chapter. In this sense, from the 1970s paranormal discourse began to be less concerned with specific instances of supernatural phenomena, and

instead was recontextualised in a post-modern conceptualisation in which supernatural entities, ghosts, extraterrestrials, cryptids, ESP, magic and any other unexplainable agency are gathered together under the common denominator of occulture (Partridge, 2014).

This onto-epistemological mobility brings us to the third specificity of the period under examination. From the late sixties onwards, in fact, occulture became partially less preoccupied with specific supernatural entities, and instead focused on relationalities, connections and communications. This is the case, for instance, of the ideas of synchronicity, of conspiratorial thinking, of the interdimensional hypothesis of UFOs, of remote viewing and mind-matter interaction. These are concepts which point at a network-centred paradigm that Davis has identified as one of the “central archetypes” of the seventies era (Davis, 2019, p.387), when “information becomes a thing-in-itself, an almost metaphysical substance that, through its technological instantiation in networks, massively shapes both individual and collective existence” (Davis, 2019, p.393). With its fifty-years span, therefore, the research will focus on the modes by which occulture has been influenced by the technological and sociocultural innovations of the Information Age (Castells, 2010), a period in which:

dominant functions and processes [were] increasingly organized around networks. Networks constitute the new social morphology of our societies, and the diffusion of networking logic substantially modifies the operation and outcomes in processes of production, experience, power, and culture. (Castells, 2010, p.500)

This new networked paradigm had an extreme impact in all aspects of society, and occultural practices as well responded and transformed to adapt to the nascent mediascape, producing an epistemological shift that is continuing to today.

Closely related to its historical boundaries, the scope of this research is also defined by a geographical limitation. Although concepts of the supernatural and the other-worldly appear in cultures around the globe – and an extraordinary variety of perspectives, traditions, and practices emerge even within the narrow temporal frame of this study – I have chosen to concentrate on the dynamic network of influences, interactions, and exchanges within the English-speaking West. Specifically, this includes the

United Kingdom (the teleplay *The Stone Tape*), Canada (the Toronto Society for Psychical Research's Philip Experiment), and the United States (the webseries *Hellier*). This emphasis on Anglophone contexts does not diminish the importance of contributions from other socio-geographical areas; rather, it reflects the broad dissemination and cultural impact of English-language texts, narratives and media objects pertaining to the occultural and the paranormal, underpinned by the political, sociocultural and economic reach of these nations on the rest of the West, and beyond.

In fact, the modern Western approach to occulture – and particularly to the paranormal, a term first coined in English academia (Penman, 2015) – is deeply rooted in UK and US cultural production, scientific inquiry, and technological innovation. In this sense, through pivotal moments in the history of the paranormal such as the origin of modern Spiritualism, the founding of the Society for Psychical Research, the psychedelic counterculture of the 1970s, the UFO phenomenon, the diffusion of paranormal entertainment shows such as *Most Haunted* and countless others, the English-speaking West has consistently shaped and propagated paranormal discourse worldwide.

Consequently, cultural texts and objects produced in the US, UK, and Canada have served both as the main carriers of an Anglophonic network since the late nineteenth century and as influential points of departure for practices and theorisations flourishing in other regions. Throughout this thesis I will trace numerous examples of this transatlantic occultural network, whose influence makes it an appropriate point of departure for the definition of a research methodology capable to be extended to the rest of the Western world.

## **1.4 Contribution to knowledge**

The existing academic literature in the field often approaches the paranormal from the point of view of its depictions and cultural representations, usually conceiving it as a discrete and finite object of investigation which, for its intrinsically uncertain position within consensual reality, requires to be analysed through, for example, psychological,

social-constructivist or narratological frameworks. Such approaches, which have nonetheless proven to be highly effective in unveiling interesting aspects, leave room for still unexplored research possibilities. With my research I aim to contribute to such gap by adopting novel epistemological and methodological approaches to the field. More specifically, the thesis will tackle multiple, interrelated, perspectives that are fundamentally lacking – or at least not sufficiently explored – in current literature on the field.

First, the need for a focus not so much on the ‘object’ of the paranormal experience – the apparition, or the alleged unexplainable phenomenon – nor on the subject – thus fundamentally researching on the psychological or culturally-conditioned reasons behind the account – but on the process itself through which the experience allegedly unfolds. In this sense, the interest is in the mediation dynamics, in the practices involved, in the perceptions reported, and in the potential technological aids. Second, the research is concerned with tracing relationships – or better, resonances – between the embodied, experiential dimension of the paranormal accounts, as well as the cultural and narrative connotations they manifest. This auspices for a non-reductionist analysis, which would consider the crucial constructive role of the experiencer, as much as the interactions and the relationalities with the external, material reality that are often intervening in paranormal events. And, in this sense, the need for a strong focus on the ecological dimension of the paranormal, and on the role of space and of place affordances, both materially and discursively.

The thesis aims to contribute first of all to the field of paranormal studies, by bringing a novel processual, communication and mediation-based approach, in order to contribute to the under-researched aspect of the ecological, interactive and performative dynamics of paranormal practices. Second, the research proposes an innovative application of theories of sound and listening, thus contributing to the more specific area of sound studies. Moreover, the project has relevance for the broader fields of cultural studies, social sciences and geography, as it proposes an analysis on peripheral but highly relevant discourses of contemporary cultural episteme.

## 1.5 Thesis content

The text of the present thesis is organised as follows. The next chapter is a literature review of the main relevant academic research in the field. In this context, I will describe the main gaps in the literature and explain how my research introduces new knowledge in those spaces. Moreover, the chapter will highlight the broad philosophical and theoretical framework that will be adopted in the study. Particular emphasis in this case will be devoted to the specific theoretical position towards sound studies. The following Methodology chapter stems from the literature review, to outline the methodological approach that will inform the research. In that context, I describe the onto-epistemological directions that move the project. I then mention some relevant methodologies that inspired and influenced my approach, which will be then introduced by describing in depth the fundamental working concept of resonance and the structure of the radio model that will constitute the main methodological framework for the analysis of the case studies. This will bring to a discussion on the reasons behind the choices of the case studies themselves and of the broader structure of the research.

Once these introductory chapters are completed, the proper research work will begin. Chapter 4 will be focused on the first of the three case studies: it is the 1972 BBC television play *The Stone Tape*, whose analysis will demonstrate the crucial role of sonic and resonance-based processes in the contemporary conceptualisation of haunting phenomena. Chapter 5 will be concerned with the so-called Philip Experiment, a parapsychological experiment conducted in the early seventies by members of the Toronto Society for Psychical Research. In this case, themes such as spirit communication and ESP will be at the centre of the inquiry, always with a focus on resonance used as both a physical phenomenon and as a concept to describe the configurations of group séance interactions. Chapter 6 will temporally progress to present days with the analysis of *Hellier*, an ongoing paranormal documentary series released in 2019. In this case, the analysis will be focused on the pivotal role of resonance and sound not only in constructing the experience of the paranormal in the portrayed real-world explorations, but also in the emergence of an online community around the series that, I will argue, arrives at assuming the shape of a counterculture. The *Hellier* chapter completes the core of the research, and the themes, concepts,

tendencies and vectors encountered until that point will be brought together in the Conclusions chapter.

There, the original aims and objectives of the research will be addressed. On one side, the chapter will summarise the main characteristics of the contemporary discourse on paranormal experience as emerged across the case studies. On the other, it will outline the structure of the methodology constructed and tested throughout the research. Successively, the chapter will list the potential further work that could stem from this PhD project. Finally, a partial, provisional closure will be described, one that will hopefully create a meaningful movement of circling back to the personal beginnings of this introduction. It is a realisation of the role of research itself and of the necessary positioning of the researcher with respect of an 'object' of study which, like sound, is never really an object but instead always a process, a relationship, a continuous exchange and compenetrating.

## 2. Literature review and theoretical framework

This chapter provides a literature review in the field of this thesis, while also laying the ground for the theoretical framework that will guide the analysis of the case studies. The chapter is thus composed of two main parts. The first, the proper literature review, draws a necessarily partial map of the existing academic research on the paranormal. It will also allow to identify some of the existing gaps in such literature, and therefore to outline which aspects of its debates this research aims to contribute to. This will lead to the second section of the chapter, which addresses the main theories and philosophical positions that will be adopted in order to fill the aforementioned gaps. Regarding the structure of the literature review, it will begin by outlining an overview of how contemporary notions and conceptualisations of the paranormal experience are studied across multiple academic areas, mapping an emerging field of research characterised by wide and disparate perspectives. It will address the concept of a 'spectral turn' developing in the last decades within humanities research. Successively, the section will conduct a broad survey of the development of the research on the paranormal between religion studies, the social sciences, anthropology, cultural studies and parapsychology.

### 2.1 The paranormal in academic research

In relatively recent years, humanities research has seen a renewed interest in the occult and the spectral, attracted by the discursive potential of the liminal, in-between ontological status of such fringe fields of knowledge. Concepts, tropes and images borrowed from horror fiction, the occult, magical thinking, or folklore – traditionally rarely considered within the walls of academia – can be found in the philosophical writings of Eugene Thacker (2011), in Graham Harman's *speculative realism* (2012), in the *theory-fiction* geopolitical novel *Cyclonopedia* (Negarestani, 2008) or in Donna Haraway's feminist theory (2016), to name a few. According to theorists of the 'spectral turn' of the cultural studies (Del Pilar Blanco and Preen, 2013), the origin of this trend may be traced back to the conceptualisation of *hauntology* by French philosopher Derrida (1994). Derrida's aim was to deconstruct the very notion of ontology, by



adopting the metaphor of the spectre to address the past and future agencies which influence reality without physically existing.

However, the hauntological concept of the ghost is seldom concerned to notions of the supernatural: in this sense, Lincoln and Lincoln explain how the ghost appears in cultural studies as a metaphor to investigate “sedimented textual residues of horrific events or, alternatively, as tropes for collective intrapsychic states and experiences, including trauma, grief, regret, repression, guilt, and a sense of responsibility” (Lincoln and Lincoln, 2015, p.200). Hauntology, therefore, is most often used as a “post-structuralist critique of mimetic theories of representation” (Holloway and Kneale, 2008, p.98). The academic literature devoted to the critical analysis of actual notions of the supernatural and the paranormal is far less frequent. As Derrida himself points out:

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. [...] [T]here is, for the scholar, only the hypothesis of a school of thought, theatrical fiction, literature, and speculation. (Derrida, 1994, p.12)

While this tendency might be identified in the context of philosophy and cultural studies – where ghosts and hauntings are indeed mostly employed as speculative tools – other fields of research have explored the multiple conceptualisation of the paranormal from different points of view, developing a body of research in parallel to the ‘spectral turn’ and composed by different epistemological and methodological frameworks. It is for instance the case of the field of religious studies, among the earliest to introduce an academic analysis of paranormal discourse as part of a broader interest on esoteric discourse and occult thinking in the modern Western world. While strictly intertwined with the study of religion and spirituality, Western esoteric studies emerged as a distinct area of academic enquiry in the early nineties (Faivre, 1992; Hanegraaff, 1995), with a particular interest on “all those cultural forms that have been marginalized and rejected by mainstream institutions from both a religious and scientific point of view” (Pasi, 2016, p.150). The field has been often characterised by a strong historical focus, and scholars have highlighted in this sense a “striking gap in scholarship on the esoteric: very little research exists on *contemporary* phenomena” (Asprem and Granholm,

2013, p.1); a gap that is however seeing relevant improvements (Kripal, 2011; Granholm, 2014; Hanegraaf, 2020).

Another issue that Asprem and Granholm criticised is a lack of interdisciplinarity in the analysis of Western esotericism, identifying in particular a “reluctance to incorporate perspectives, theories, and methodology from the social sciences” (Asprem and Granholm, 2013, p.3). In this sense, the last two decades in social studies has indeed been characterised by the emergence of a growing body of research specifically addressing paranormal practices and their sociocultural diffusion within contemporary Western world. A relevant example is found in Eaton, who investigates the sociological dynamics of “how people make sense of what they believe to be experiences with ghosts” (Eaton, 2020, p.5), in the context of American paranormal subcultures. The author conceives the supernatural as a “*social accomplishment*, a product of interpretive processes that take place within specific cultural, idiocultural, and locational contexts, all of which influence individuals’ perceptions of what “really” occurs in reportedly haunted places” (Eaton, 2020, p.1). This position is influenced by folklorist David Hufford’s seminal study on the connections between sleep paralysis phenomena and accounts of supernatural experiences (Hufford, 1988). Hufford proposes an experience-based approach which will prove relevant for my research as well, as it takes into account the mutual interplay between the cultural and the embodied sides of paranormal accounts, independently from their empirical verifiability.

A related perspective is recently found in the context of anthropology. More specifically, Jack Hunter coins the term *paranthropology* to address an “ethnographic approach that makes use of tools that destabilise ontological certainty, at least in the context of the ethnographic text, but also experientially in the field” (Hunter, 2015, p.16), characterised by an attempt to “embrace a perspective that is equally critical of all explanatory frameworks” (Hunter, 2015, p.17), outside easy reductionisms. Hunter advocates for an agnostic view of the paranormal, one which is more concerned with processes than with the evidential evaluation of the claimed supernatural entities:

In my own research I have moved away from asking 'why questions' (such as 'why do people believe in spirits'), towards 'how questions,' namely questions about the possible processes involved [...] [A]sking 'how do people communicate

with spirits' presents researchers with the opportunity to engage with this research without the constant need to question the reality of spirits, which can often distract from what is actually going on. (Hunter, 2015b, p.83)

This position is of great interest for this thesis as it engages specifically with the intersections between the paranormal and the everyday, thanks to a 'how'-centred approach which makes it possible to trace the processes of shifting between these two extremes, rather than to consider the why of alleged ontological impossibilities.

With regards to a study of the paranormal discourse in tight resonance with the everyday, further literature can be found in the area of cultural studies, "moving beyond theorizations that rely on a dichotomous separation between an everyday seen as orderly and devoid of wonder, and a ghostly interruption [...] that is invariably unsettling" (Pereen, 2010, p.115). In this sense Partridge researches on the cultural dynamics of countercultural groups related to the paranormal and the occult, themes that he considers "no longer hidden or unfamiliar" to mainstream culture, but instead "ordinary and everyday" (Partridge, 2014, p.113), to the point of becoming "commodified, marketed, branded and invested with economic value" (Partridge, 2014, p.114).

Cultural studies see the paranormal as "a cultural artefact, a social trend, a way of packaging the world, of binding the unexplained to narrative" (Jenzen and Munt, 2016, p.15) that is everchanging across generations and cultures, although the authors are careful of highlighting "how much of Western paranormal culture is linked to whiteness" (Jenzen and Munt, 2016, p.21). This important consideration opens up for a post-colonial reading of spectrality and haunting (Lee, 2016; Mukherjee, 2019) where the ghost is interpreted as an expression of the trauma of the haunting past of oppression and slavery, or of the social marginalisation of Indigenous people (Cameron, 2008). In this context, Knox recently explored the field of dark tourism and the spectral re-enactment of underexposed colonial heritages of slavery, "an understanding of spectrality points to further complexity in relationships in the sense that the city is haunted by alternative stories about people, place and practices that have the characteristics of hauntings" (Knox, 2024, p.2) as forgotten and silenced by mainstream narratives.

The social studies proposed so far demonstrate, among other things, a particular relevance of space and place as a crucial contributor to the conceptualisation of the paranormal as well as to its sociocultural interpretation. Not coincidentally, therefore, one of the richest bodies of research conducted in this context is found in the field of cultural and human geography. Here, in the last twenty years, ghosts and hauntings have been studied as discursive, embodied and performative traces of historical, social and cultural dimensions of place (Adey and Madder, 2008). For instance, Pile (2005) considers ghosts as echoes of the repressed, the revenant and the hidden in the urban everyday, in between the metaphorical and the material, while Dixon (2007) explores the 'extra-geography' of paranormal myths and urban legends bounded to particular spaces. Spectrality is also seen as an effective method of researching what is not physically existing anymore but can be felt peripherally and remotely (McCormack, 2010).

Approaches that consider the paranormal experience within and as part of the everyday can be found in Holloway as well, declaring that the paranormal "cannot be seen as absolute other and cannot be simply distanced as the constitutive outside of the self" (Holloway, 2017, p.36). At the same time, the interpretative uncertainty that consistently affects many attempts at analysing and make sense of ghostly phenomena needs to be considered as an important aspect of the spectral to be taken into account in academic research:

haunted spaces and ghostly geographies often engender an interpretive position caught or frozen between a worldly or familiar explanation of events and a purely supernatural explanation of situations. This uncertainty and hesitancy is, we would argue, the specificity and particularity of spectral geographies. Indeed, the interpretative criteria we use to understand spectral geographies must likewise be hesitant. Ghosts can never be fully understood, represented or brought into representation. (Holloway and Kneale, 2008, p.308)

This is important to consider the most peripheral, subtle dimension of paranormal claims from a non-reductionist perspective. The study of the paranormal carried out in the field of geography will prove to be highly influential for this research, as the experiences of the supernatural described by the case studies under analysis are crucially

bounded to ecological interactions – as will be seen, mostly happening at auditory and haptic levels – with and within specific spaces charged with paranormal meaning.

Moving to a distant research field, psychology applied to paranormal studies often operates an opposite move, by strongly focusing on the psychological causes behind paranormal claims. While certainly extremely relevant for the close relationship often evidenced between beliefs in the supernatural and mental health, this approach will be rather distant from the one proposed in my research. A vast body of research related to supernatural experiences can be found in the various branches of psychology studies and, in particular, in the sub-fields of parapsychology – which attempts to evaluate the scientific plausibility of psychokinesis, extrasensory perception and life after death – and anomalist psychology – which focuses on a broader explanation of reported paranormal experiences in terms of psychological, cognitive or neurological causes (French and Stone, 2013, p.14).

The paranormal is studied in psychological research by employing several different approaches, usually methodologically related to participant observation, interviews and statistical analysis<sup>1</sup>. For instance, cognitive psychology explains paranormal experiences as delusional events caused by the ambiguity of perceptual stimuli, by attentional biases and problem-solving processes (Houran, 2001), while others focus on the relationships between perception, suggestion and reality testing deficit (Dagnall et al., 2015). Other approaches can be found in the field of behavioural psychology, where the supernatural experience is understood as an effect of processes of group-think (Sutherland, 1992), or as emerging from suggestion and expectations in practices of supernatural communication (Wiseman et al., 2003). Moreover, the experience of paranormal phenomena is conceived – by research in the fields of psychobiology and neurosciences – as the result of various neurological conditions, sleep disorders (French and Stone, 2013, p.94), or as the consequence of brain stimulations with electromagnetic (Persinger, 1993) or sub-auditory wave patterns (Wiseman et al., 2003).

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<sup>1</sup> Several scales have been developed to quantitatively assess the subjective belief in the supernatural, such as the Australian Sheep-Goat Scale or the Revised Paranormal Belief Scale (French and Stone, 2013, p.10).

The literature proposed so far outlines multiple research paths that are emerging and developing from a wide range of areas of academic enquiry, from the humanities to the biological sciences. As already highlighted by some of the scholars mentioned so far, however, the existing map of paranormal academic literature still presents multiple under-researched aspects that would benefit from further analysis and theoretical formalisations. Among the gaps that can be identified, three particular areas are specifically addressed by this thesis. First, the need for a cohesive interdisciplinary approach to the study of paranormal lore and accounts, one that could allow to trace the interplay between the disparate influences, frameworks and conditionings that are involved in stories of paranormal experiences: cultural background, fiction, sociocultural dynamics, as well as perceptions, emotions, technologies, philosophies and performances, all of which are intertwined in heterogeneous discursive networks. Second, the necessity for a methodological approach that could consider the affective dynamics of paranormal experiences. These are aspects that are usually the most difficult to manage in academic research that aims at avoiding biased ontological positions and reductionisms regarding the empirical veracity of paranormal accounts.

Moreover, the literature explored so far often manifests an ocular-centric approach to the analysis of the paranormal, with resulting positions which often tend towards distanced explanations on visual representations and imageries. Comparatively little research is conducted on the auditory, haptic and embodied dimension of the paranormal experience, of the spaces in which it happens and of the performative dynamics connected to paranormal practices. In order to create appropriate epistemological and methodological approaches that could have a significant contribution to these gaps, the following section will overview the theoretical framework that will be adopted in the analysis.

## **2.2 Theoretical framework**

As mentioned in the introduction chapter, this research is focused on the processes involved in contemporary notions of paranormal experiences, with an emphasis on the pre-representational, ecological and embodied dynamics involved in such accounted

events. Initially, this section will discuss the concept of the eerie as recently formulated by Mark Fisher (2017), as a pivotal concept that will recur throughout the thesis. Then, theories of affect and affective atmosphere, Karen Barad's agential realism and Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the territory and the refrain will be outlined, as further theoretical building blocks of the thesis. Successively, all the theoretical positions explored so far will be brought together in the specific context of this thesis' objectives, with a detailed overview of the theories on sound, on the vibratory, and on ecologies of listening. These will be the ontological, epistemological and methodological vectors through which the widely interdisciplinary theoretical framework will be adapted to the analysis of the case studies.

## **The eerie**

The process-based approach of this thesis requires to partially move away from a close focus on the representation of the entities involved in the analysed paranormal accounts, and instead being able to trace the constructions, transformations and movements of the networks of agencies that are involved in the paranormal experiences. In other words, the analysis will not be particularly focused on the forms, the imageries and the phenomenologies of claimed paranormal encounters, but rather on how particular processes imbue specific spaces and events with the potential of agencies that defy rational and deterministic understanding of reality. A relevant theoretical starting point in this sense is the concept of the eerie as defined by Mark Fisher in his popular *The Weird and the Eerie* (Fisher, 2017). The book is a study born from the necessity of a new critical approach to what "lies beyond standard perception, cognition and experience" (Fisher, 2017, p.8), aimed at freeing cultural studies from the hegemonic — and most often inaccurate (Fisher, 2017, p.9) — use of the Freudian's *unheimlich*, which "operates by always processing the outside through the gaps and impasses of the inside" (Fisher, 2017, p.10).

In this regard, Fisher's notion of the weird involves "a sensation of wrongness" (Fisher, 2017, p.15): the unsettling experience of a (material) presence that should not exist, and therefore obliterates any attempt to frame it within an established system of knowledge. Conversely, the eerie is "constituted by a failure of absence or by a failure of presence" (Fisher, 2017, p.61). It marks a shift from a question of presence to a

“question of agency” (Fisher, 2017, p.11): the eerie is experienced when the doubt that arises not only addresses the nature of the agencies involved but questions the very presence of an intentional agency at all. The definition of the eerie resembles Todorov’s conceptualisation of the literary fantastic as a moment of hesitation, a transitory phase in which both the reader and the character oscillate between natural and supernatural explanations (Todorov, 1975).

The eerie will be one of the key concepts in this research, as it highlights the processual nature of the paranormal experience: Fisher’s conceptualisation of the eerie will allow to consider the paranormal not as an object – or as an entity – but as a movement that shifts an ordinary understanding of the world to gradually deterritorialise the fundamental affordances of the everyday. Fisher points out how this sensation stands in-between everyday experiences and cultural representations: although being “certainly triggered by particular cultural forms, it does not originate in them. We can and often do encounter the sensation of the eerie in the raw, without the need for specific forms of cultural mediation” (Fisher, 2017, p.61). Moreover, it most often involves a strong spatial and environmental dimension (Fisher, 2017, p.61).

The eerie will therefore be considered, in this research, as the movement in-between the everyday and the paranormal, the very vector that creates that sensation which precedes and at the same time prepares for the paranormal experience. In this sense, therefore, the eerie will be identified as a fundamentally pre-representational feeling, a happening which is not yet framed within shared and consistent imageries or narratives, but that at the same time constitute the foundation of the paranormal imagination. The eerie, in other words, is not yet a paranormal experience, but the necessary condition for its emergence: a sensation of indeterminacy, of doubt and transitoriness, about happenings that *seem to* be manoeuvred by some invisible agency which is yet to be revealed in its full presence, either as rationally explainable or as mysteriously otherworldly. As will be clearly expressed in the chapters that follow, the eerie could be considered as the trigger for the sensation of haunting, as that spatially-bounded feeling of presence whose source is however only questioned and often even confused between an internal psychological disposition and a perceptual, external event. For this reason, the sensation of the eerie will be considered as particularly related to



the theory of pre-representational affects and, in particular, of the concept of affective atmospheres.

### **An affective and atmospheric approach to the paranormal**

Processes, relationalities, movements are some important components of the embodied dynamics that this thesis considers as necessary for the formation of the eerie. In this regard, the analysis needs to be able to address some particularly subtle and peripheral modulations of the perceptual experiences described in paranormal accounts, often happening alongside and beyond rational representations and narrativisations. In his *Parables for the Virtual*, Brian Massumi aims at rejecting the Kantian separation between body and mind, as well as to rethink the supremacy of language over matter postulated by the “linguistic turn”, investigating the “unclassifiable, the unassimilable, the never-yet-felt” (Massumi, 2002, p.33) dimensions of experience. He defines affects as experiences of *intensity*: pre-subjective, pre-semantic autonomous forces that invest the individual before any cognitive, semiotic or narrative qualification of the perceived event. Conversely, Massumi conceives emotion as:

qualified intensity, the conventional, consensual point of intersection of intensity into semantically and semiotically formed progressions, into narrativizable action-reaction circuits, into function and meaning. (Massumi, 2002, p.28)

There is therefore a fundamentally pre-representational dimension to experience, one that would prove highly valuable for a study of subtle and transitory dynamics such as those of the eerie. As mentioned above, a crucial dimension in this sense will be the relationships with space and how the affective sensation of the eerie could emerge from specific ecological interactions. McCormack, for instance, declares that “[t]he spectral is that which is always remote yet always potentially sensed as a felt variation of affective materials” (McCormack, 2010, p.643), understood as “a constitutive element of geographical experience, taking place as a persistent and unsettling capacity of place to enchant and haunt” (McCormack, 2010, p.642). In this regard, an important point of investigation is the transformative power of eerie-affected spaces in terms of performativity and meaning-production dynamics. Holloway and Kneale express that:

Registering the ghostly displaces and dislocates material geographies. [...] [N]o longer offering their normal course of practicable action, dislocated ghostly materialities disrupt our senses of space. In other words, the familiar object-spaces that endure through habitual practice are made strange and mysterious. (Hollway and Kneale, 2008, p.304)

Here, the theories about affective atmospheres will prove to be highly fruitful in my research, as they particularly point at the connections between affect and space. For Anderson, the term atmosphere “seems to express something vague, an ill-defined something, that exceeds rational explanation and clear figuration, something that hesitates at the edge of the unsayable” and occur “*before* and *alongside* the formation of subjectivity” (Anderson, 2009, p.78). For Böhme, atmospheres as in-between phenomena: nebulous and numinous “object-like emotions, which are randomly cast into a space” (Böhme, 2000, p.15). He considers atmospheres as *quasi-objective*, meaning that they can be conceived as subjective sensations which are however experienced as “something “out there,” something which can come over us, into which we are drawn, which takes possession of us like an alien power” (Böhme, 2016, p.38). Michiels explains how affective atmospheres are “neither solely located in material environment nor solely in the human body, but emerging from the resonances between its various components” (Michiels, 2015, p.257). Atmospheres, in fact are not experienced as mere encounters with external objects but, in Stewart’s view (2011), they emerge as forms of attunements.

When reading affective atmospheres defined as the “felt presence of something or someone in space” (Böhme, 2016, p.99), or the “sensing of something happening that can be felt” (McCormack, 2015, p.91), a potential tight connection between the concepts of affective atmospheres and that of Fisher’s eerie seems to emerge preponderantly, as the concept of atmospheres can be used to express the hesitancy and the transitoriness of the “question of agency” (Fisher, 2017, p.11) that the eerie addresses. Moreover, for Fisher, the sensation of the eerie is an aesthetic experience that can arise both spontaneously or intentionally triggered by specific processes (Fisher, 2017, p.61). In my research I aim to explore this aspect from an atmospheric perspective. In this sense, it is interesting to read from Böhme that atmospheres can be unexpectedly encountered as well as *staged* through the art of modulating the material properties of

architectures, objects, light sources and, of course, sound. In fact, Böhme asserts that atmospheres are produced by establishing “conditions in which these phenomena can emerge” (Böhme, 2016, p.41).

### **The formation of agency through interaction**

The previous paragraphs addressed the concepts of affect and atmosphere as theoretical tools to address the subtle and peripheral ecological and interactive modulations that will be analysed in the context of the sensation of the eerie. Here, another element will be added, specifically relative to how the “question of agency” that defines the eerie is constructed, felt, performed and distributed. This will be read through the lenses of Karen Barad’s agential realism (Barad, 2007), which investigates how agency is constructed through specific material-discursive assemblages:

[A]gency is a matter of intra-acting; it is an enactment, not something someone or something has. Agency cannot be designated as an attribute of “subjects” or “objects” (as they do not preexist as such). Agency is about the possibilities and accountability entailed in refiguring material-discursive apparatuses of bodily production, including the boundary articulations and exclusions that are marked by those practices. (Barad, 1999, p.7)

In Barad’s theory agency does not pre-exist as a property of subjects or objects, but it is rather a relationality between objects which is continuously renegotiated, reconstructed and redistributed through the application of different assemblages of observation, interaction and experimentation. In the case of this thesis, therefore, the events that lead to the sensation of the eerie – whether ‘spontaneous’ occurrences or specifically staged practices – will assume the form of an intra-action, a onto-epistemological process which produces the agential cut from which distinctions between observing subjects and observing objects are made:

individually determinate entities do not exist [...] A phenomenon is a specific intra-action of an “object” and the “measuring agencies”; the object and the measuring agencies emerge from, rather than precede, the intra-action that produces them (Barad, 2007, p.145)

Another important aspect of Barad's formulation is that it flattens every taken-for-granted agential primacy, conceiving instead agency as emerging from networks of intra-actions which:

acknowledge nature, the body, and materiality in the fullness of their becoming without resorting to [...] the theoretization of the human as either pure cause or pure effect while at the same time remaining absolutely accountable for the role "we" play in the intertwined practices of knowing and becoming. (Barad, 2003, p.812)

Through an agential realist approach it is therefore possible to trace the processes of the eerie experience from a non-dualistic point of view, and the practices of the paranormal as "material-discursive" practices [...] recognized as being productive rather than merely descriptive" (Barad, 1999, p.2). With Barad's agential realism, the theoretical framework here proposed is equipped with a lens able to trace how peripheral affective intensities and atmospheric modulations of space can produce sensations of agency that, in turn, trigger the sensation of the eerie.

### **The paranormal as a refrain between territories**

The eerie has been then conceptualised as a process, a vector that creates the necessary conditions for the experience of the paranormal. According to the research' main objectives listed in the introduction, however, the thesis not only addresses the 'onboarding' process of the paranormal – or how it is prepared by what precedes the charging of things, spaces and events with supernatural meaning – but it necessarily needs to take into account the discursive dynamics of such accounts as well: how the paranormal is effectively conceived, how it is narrated and shared. In other words, the sense making involved in affective, ambiguous lived experiences that, for multiple reasons, arrives at conceiving the cause of otherworldly agencies. In order to address this point, therefore, an important addition to the research is a theorisation on the modes of semiotic de- and re-territorialisation: how the socio-cultural frameworks that define the affordances and the possibilities of interaction – therefore the agencies – of what is defined as the everyday gets challenged and subverted to reconstruct a new semiotic of the real able to welcome the potential of the paranormal.

In this sense, the atmospheric and affective dynamics of the eerie will be conceived in terms of deterritorialising vectors. At the same time, practices of otherworldly communication such as séances or magic rituals will be studied as processes which territorialise the eerie into a paranormal territory: where the presence of paranormal agencies are made sensuous and with which it is possible to interact. This conceptualisation of the paranormal as shifting of territories through the modulation of affective intensities and agencies will be analysed throughout the research by following Deleuze and Guattari's theorisation of the refrain, the principal process that they identify, in their *One Thousand Plateaus* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988), as the process of construction, transformation and dissolution of semiotic territories. The refrain is defined as “any aggregate of matters of expression that draws a territory and develops into territorial motifs and landscapes” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, p.323), and as “reiterative discursive sequences [...] whose function is an extrinsic catalysing of existential affects” (Guattari, 1990, p.62). The refrain is therefore the process by which what is pre-representational and unformalised – in this sense, conceptually related to the indeterminate question of agency of the eerie – become framed within existing (or emerging) rules, structures, discourses.

Refrains involve the establishment of a “fragile centre” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, p.311) from which it is possible to draw the territorial boundaries that separate from the outside, the unformed and rhizomatic forces of Cosmos. This corresponds as a first, albeit weak, attempt at establishing a form of ordering:

affective events begin in a powerful indetermination [...]. The force of this indetermination – a chaos that soon begins to press upon a context – calls for refrains to fold the chaos into the beginnings of structure, to bring a little order [...]. This is a crucial moment in the constitution of affective territories. Refrains constitute what will always be fragile. (Bertelsen and Murphie, 2010, p.139)

The fragility and transitoriness of these ordering formations will be fundamental for the understanding of the emergence of the paranormal experience in its most subtle and peripheral dynamics. The second phase of the refrain is the creation of a shelter, a home, established by drawing a circle around the territorial centre. It is a boundary-making discursive practice, a *cut* (Barad, 2007) which organises what is kept outside the home – the forces of chaos – and what is organised inside – causal relations,

structures, hierarchies of agency. The result of this process is not a fixed demarcation but rather an “oscillational” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, p.320) bordering, which defines the everchanging cartography of a territory which is “never given as object but always as intense repetition” (Guattari, 1995, p.28). For the philosophers, in fact, “territorialisation is an act of rhythms that has become expressive” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, p.315).

Again, the bordering process is not stable and fixed: “the form of the refrain is not, therefore, a stable distribution of “formed” affects. It is an erratic and evolving distribution of both coming into being and the power to affect and be affected” (Bertlesen and Murphie, 2010, p.145). This eventually brings to the third component of the refraining process, which explains what the consequences of this ever-changing, oscillatory bordering are: “[f]inally, one opens the circle a crack, opens it all the way, lets someone in, calls someone, or else goes out oneself, launches forth” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, p.362). The construction of a territory therefore necessarily involves an opening towards a new outside, the potential for new interactions and new explorations, recursively.

This brief and partial overview of the theory of the refrain as formulated by Deleuze and Guattari concludes the definition of the principal theoretical and philosophical framework that will be adopted in the thesis. To summarise, Fisher’s concept of the eerie allows to address the paranormal not in terms of entities and phenomena but as “questions of agency of the immaterial and the inanimate” (Fisher, 2017, p.61), thus focusing particularly in the relationships between the everyday and the supernatural from embodied, felt and affective points of view. Therefore, theories of affect and affective atmospheres will prove useful to trace such pre-representational modulations of the eerie from spatial and ecological points of view, understanding the resulting sensations of agencies as emerging from a resonance between the internal and the external.

In this context, a further flattening of the distinctions between experiencing subject and experienced event comes from agential realism. Barad’s formulation is important to direct the analysis towards a processual and relational approach, in which subjects, objects and experiential apparatuses are not a priori determined but rather constantly

renegotiated in movement, in becoming. Furthermore, the focus on the Deleuze and Guattarian refrain will prove relevant in order to trace the processes that lead to the paranormal experience as understood in terms of construction and transformation of semiotic territories: fields of interaction where agency is framed within specific possibilities and potentialities.

But how do these affective modulations happen? At what stage of the experience is the eerie perceived? Through which sensory modalities? These questions will be addressed in the next section, which will delve in detail into the specific theoretical positions regarding the field of sound studies. As declared in the introduction of this thesis, the present research is not so much research on the sonic phenomenologies related to the contemporary paranormal experience but, instead, a study that constructs a methodology of investigation of the paranormal discourse by using sound as an onto-epistemological tool to trace the processes of the paranormal experience. For this reason, all the theories explored so far will be read through the lenses of sound studies. In other words, the affective, atmospheric processes that are involved in the sensation of the eerie will be empirically traced within the case studies by following how sound intervenes in the construction of the paranormal experience, or how paranormal practices employ listening-based processes in order to deterritorialise the ordinary affordances of place, or how particular ecologies of listening are involved in the emergence of the eerie question of agency in situations where the visual sensorium loses its traditional primacy.

## **2.3 Approaching the sonic dimension of the paranormal**

This section outlines the existing research on the sonic dimension of the paranormal, to then propose the main sound studies framework that will be adopted throughout the research. The importance of the sonic in the context of the eerie is highlighted by Fisher himself, when saying that “the shift to sound opens up the eerie. There is an intrinsically eerie dimension to acousmatic sound” (Fisher, 2017, p.81). Similarly, Bennett states that the sensation of enchantment requires a “cultivated form of perception, a discerning and meticulous attentiveness to the singular specificity of things (Bennett,

2001, p.37), with listening having a crucial role in this attentiveness, as “sonorous experience is central to enchantment” (Bennett, 2001, p.36). Royle too, in his exhaustive exploration of the literary *uncanny*, observes that in L. G. Moberly’s gothic story *Inexplicable*:

there is a concern with the strangeness of sounds — a creaking, a click, a clang. This sense of eeriness in the ear, the ‘eariness’ of the uncanny, recurs throughout the story. [...] this story provides striking examples of an auditory dimension that is crucial to a critical apprehension of ‘the uncanny’. (Royle, 2003, p.136)

Many of the critical inquiries that recognise the role of the sonic in notions of the supernatural are confined to fiction theory and narratology: they most often analyse sound as a narrative tool to express the ambiguous, unresolved nature of otherworldly entities, such as ghosts and monsters.

For Van Elferen the monstrous is, by definition, beyond the making-sense capability of the human mind: for this reason, “monsters need representation – metaphor and mediation – in order to become perceivable” (Van Elferen, 2016b, p.16). Listening, especially when detached from vision, is seen by Van Elferen as a way to mediate such formless perceptions. She investigates the use of foley artistry and electronic sonic elaborations in cinema to produce ambiguous and unrecognisable sonic objects which can trigger imaginative processes, with the mind filling the gap of the lacking visual reference with eldritch and terrifying representations. Similarly, the trope of the transformed voice is studied as a recurring theme in gothic and horror literature. For Foley, the a-symbolic, hybrid dimension of non-human voice is crucial on the way “such sonic horrors play upon the uniqueness of the voice as both a carrier of obscenities and an aberration itself” (Foley, 2018, p.462).

Acousmatic sound — the condition of listening without seeing the origin of the sound event — is also studied as an effective narrative strategy to represent the in-between, liminal ontology of ghostly entities. Toop, for example, writes how the notion of spectral manifestation shares with sound a complex relation with materiality: both sounds and ghosts can be seen as ‘absent presences’ invisibly haunting the space. In his book *Sinister Resonance*, he claims that sound is “a haunting, a ghost, a presence whose



location in space is ambiguous and whose existence in time is transitory”, comparing the listener to a “medium who draws out substance from that which is not entirely there” (Toop, 2010, p.xv).

The origin of the positions summarised above can be traced back to the post-Shaefferian studies about the synesthetic and referential possibilities of listening in an acousmatic context (Roads, 2015, p.336). Remarkable researches in this field can be found in Schafer’s concept of a *schizophonic* split between the physical sound and its electroacoustic reproduction (Schafer, 1993, p.90), and in Chion’s research on the negotiation between visual absence and sonic presence in cinematic use of the *acousmetre* (Chion, 2019, p.129). Likewise, sonic perception and imaginative processes are put in relation with each other in the works of, for example, Idhe (1970), Çamci (2016) and Andean (2016). Viewed through these lenses, Van Elferen’s assertion that “because we cannot see the source of these sounds, our synesthetic imagination will project its own repressed fears onto that invisible entity” (Van Elferen, 2016a, p.2) strongly resonates with positions such as that of composer and researcher Dennis Smalley:

From sound alone I can constitute in my imagination the layout and activity of a scene; or the shape of a spectro-morphological event (however ‘abstract’) [...]. [T]he auditory sense calls on the companion senses to participate on the enactment of a spatial experience. (Smalley, 2007, p.40)

### **From acousmatics to ecologies of listening**

As outlined above, this research aims to construct an approach to the analysis of paranormal experiences which focuses on the processes of their emergence — analysing their dimensions of relationality and communication — instead on the representations and the depictions of otherworldly entities. For this reason, the acousmatic approach will not be particularly suitable for this research project, as it particularly refers to mechanisms of perception and cognitive representation. More specifically, an acousmatic approach of the paranormal would focus necessarily on the subjective dynamics connected to particular sonic phenomena whose source is hidden from sight and thus

understood as bearer of cognitive ambiguity and imaginative processes of image reconstruction. In this case, the question would be posed preponderantly on how sonic perception creates mental representations and how these can be connected to cultural imageries and forms influencing the interpretation towards the idea of the supernatural.

Moreover, acousmatic perception presumes a clear separation between a listening subject and a listened object-source: the object produces sound, and the subject's auditory sensorium perceives it, while the mind interprets it as evidence of paranormal presence. This is in contrast with agential realist onto-epistemologies which, once applied to the context of the paranormal, outline an auditory interaction in which the paranormal 'entity' does not pre-exist – either as a rationally-explainable deception or as a genuine supernatural occurrence – but is instead produced through and during the ecological interaction itself, as an emergent phenomenon of agency happening between bodies, objects, spaces, discourses, narratives, and more.

In sound studies, in fact, the phenomenological perspective of acousmatics is sometimes criticised (Ingold, 2007), as it presupposes the presence of a subject-listener separated and independent from the sonic environment. Recently, researchers such as Voegelin have challenged this approach, claiming that “[w]e do not hear entities but relationships” (Voegelin, 2014, p.162). The scholar explores the sonorous as a relational phenomenon that underlies meaning, conceptualisation and even processes of subjectification: “It’s not me or you whom I hear in its material but I hear both of us relating to the material processes that encompass our processes of listening [...]” (Voegelin, 2019, p.88). Voegelin investigates the auditory experience as a way to “think the non-human matter of this world before its representation, or ‘correction’, in language and rational thought” (Voegelin, 2019, p.152). Her book *Sonic Possible Worlds* focuses on how the materiality of sonic relationships relates with a phenomenology of the ephemeral, the possible and the virtual: “Sound hints at the improbability of one truth and meaning of thing and instead opens the imagination to the possibility of all that could be” (Voegelin, 2014, p.94). The research of Voegelin will be one of the main references in my work, as I find interesting comparisons between the notion of the eerie described above and Voegelin’s perspective on the sonic:

Listening I hear the possibility of life-worlds that are not delineated by the visible but conjured from the invisible in sound, whose actuality is negotiated continually rather than assumed. (Voegelin, 2014, p.37)

The influential essay on listening by French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy (Nancy, 2009) can be seen as a complementary perspective. For Nancy, sound is conceived not as a medium for the transmission of pre-established meanings, but as a dynamic space where meanings emerge in a continuous relation between bodies and objects. Nancy highlights how space and the body of the listener are not fixed in an object-subject duality. Space “is not a place where the subject comes to make himself heard”, on the contrary, the sonic event makes space “[become] a subject insofar as sound resounds there” (Nancy, 2009, p.19).

The sound studies positions outlined so far trace a fundamental ecological dimension of sound, whereby soundscape “is not an object, but instead a constant experience we live in” (Berrens, 2016, p.2) and listeners “do not merely occupy a space or a context, they are constitutive of the context set to sound-making” (Di Scipio, 2015). In this sense, sound artist and theorist Agostino Di Scipio arrives at highlighting an ideological dimension to the concept of sound objects:

On the opposite side of the *reductio ad objectum* is an awareness that sound is almost impossible to reify: grasped in the eventuality of time, in the three-dimensionality of space, in the semantic connotation of places, the sound event takes place before the cognitive habit forces it into a logic of separateness and objectivity, before measurements and quantifications of value. The sound object has an ideological statute [...]. It is a cultural device that forges a cognitive construction. [...] Sound is in fact never really an object. It is, instead, always an event. [...] Sound is never sound in itself, but always sound in a context of relationships. Sound is always a "relational" dimension of experience, the trace of a network of interactions, of a chain of mediations. (Di Scipio, 2012, p.65, my translation)

It is through this conceptualisation of the sonic that this research attempts at delineating an agential realist approach to the eerie. As mentioned before, listening is conceived as a process which is never merely descriptive but also constructive of the listened event and, in particular, of the agential relationships between listening subjects and listened objects. This framework is further strengthened when considering an extended view of sound, to encompass not only the narrow spectrum of the auditory

frequency range – roughly between 20 and 20000Hz – but also the bodily and material effect of the full range of the vibratory.

A dual material and relational nature of vibration is a recurrent concept in *New Materialist* philosophies (Fox and Alldred, 2019; Gamble, Hanan and Nail, 2019): vibrations are conceived as an example of the agential capacity of inanimate matter which, at the same time, “focus our attention to the interconnectedness and co-occurring of human and more-than-human materialities, bodies and entities” (Fast, Leppanen and Tiainen, 2018). In *Vibrant Matter* Bennett, among the most representative of the field, addresses the agential powers of objects, flattening the hierarchical division between ‘vibrant’ life and dull, inert matter, exploring “the curious power of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle” (Bennett, 2010, p.6).

### **From sound to the vibratory**

At the end of the previous section a materialist approach to sound studies has opened to an extension of the field from the strictly auditory to the whole spectrum of vibratory phenomena. This important position will be highly relevant in the context of this research, as it will allow to extend the peripheral, affective intensities at the source of the sensation of the eerie as part of a sensory stimulation which is not limited to the audible but instead involves further embodied relationalities of the haptic, the proprioceptive and, in general, the felt: a fundamental dimension of many notions of the paranormal (Tandy and Street, 2000, Parsons, 2012).

With the notion of *unsound* — which refers to the extreme regions of the auditory (such as infra- and ultra-sonic frequencies), as well as “syntheses as yet uninvented, unheard, or rendered audible only by auditory prostheses” (Goodman, Heys and Ikonidou, 2019, p.106) — art-research group AUDINT rethink audible sound as just a portion of a wider spectrum of vibratory phenomena which affect the body beyond the sole cochlear excitation. In his *Sonic Warfare*, Goodman delineates an “ontology of vibrational force” (Goodman, 2012, p.81) which describes how non-audible vibration “transforms the ambience of a space, modulating its affective tonality, tapping into the resonant frequency of objects, rendering the virtual vibrations of matter vaguely sensible” (Goodman, 2012, p.79). He illustrates how material interactions between bodies,

objects and waveforms affect us, individually and collectively. Drawing from Massumi's theory of affect Goodman highlights the relationship between vibratory phenomena and the affective foundations of fear and threat, sensations that have always been tightly connected to conceptualisations of the paranormal. Similarly, Jasen (2016) explores the effects of sub-auditory bass frequencies, outlining the role of the material-affective power of vibratory phenomena in alleged experiences of haunting, hallucinatory perceptions and trance rituals. The concept of unsound is employed by AUDINT as an epistemological tool to access marginal and peripheral cultural trajectories and practices, as unsound seemingly "lends itself to everything from conspiracy theories to hyperstitional narratives where an unsonic fiction enters into a process of becoming real. [...] [A]n unsound strategy appropriates sonic fiction, weaponizing the art and science of self-fulfilling prophecies" (Goodman, Heys and Ikoniadou, 2019, p.106).

Heys further develops the relationship between peripheral vibratory phenomena and politics, where the use of unsonic frequencies is "harnessed as tools and weapons to demarcate physiological, spatial, and psychological territories" (Heys, 2011, p.10). Particularly relevant in my research is Heys' investigation of the socio-political and cultural consequences of bodies immersed in

"waveformed spaces", environments whose territorial borders cannot be effectively sealed by facts, observation, or recording. The intrinsic and constant negotiations of the unutterable and unspeakable by the inhabitants of such environments, means that the boundaries are constantly recomposed and never rigid. It is precisely this fluctuating dynamic that permits unofficial, unscientific, and unrecognised languages to translate waveforms into exchangeable knowledge [...]. (Heys, 2011, p.22)

Once again, it is possible to find here a conceptualisation of the extended auditory as a medium through which agency is created, moved and distributed across bodies and objects, and through which these modulations of agency are able to generate sensations and meanings of the otherworldly. The vibratory, which is "neither wholly material nor wholly discursive: it has physical existence but cannot itself be perceived except through its effects" (Trower, 2012, p.8) is thus particularly connected to the notion of the eerie, making it a valuable tool to explore the paranormal experiences analysed in this thesis, and to adapt the theoretical positions of affect theory, theories of affective

atmospheres and agential realism to the context of paranormal studies outside the epistemological dominance of the visual, of the distanced, and of the dualistic opposition between internal-subjective and the external-objective. All the academic investigations explored so far in this literature review will directly inform the next chapter, focused on the epistemological and methodological dimensions of this research, with the sound studies positions becoming the theoretical and epistemological lenses informing the methodological aim of the research.



### 3. Methodology

This thesis' aim is primarily methodological. Therefore, this chapter serves as a foundation of the research's principal endeavour, making it particularly relevant as the chapter which will lay the epistemological ground not only for the methodology employed to analyse the case studies, but also for the construction of the thesis' objective itself. It will then focus on the specificities of an epistemology founded on sound and listening, and how that could represent a valid and novel opportunity for the analysis of the paranormal experience. The chapter will then delve into the specific "working concept" (Slaby et al., 2019) that will be adopted in the research – that of resonance – and the operative methodological model that will stem from the concept of resonance and that will be operatively used on – and tested against – the three case studies: the radio model. Finally, the chapter will introduce the case studies themselves, highlighting the reasons behind their choice and which principal angles will be specifically analysed.

A research methodology has been broadly defined as "a theory and analysis of how research should proceed", and the "analysis of the assumptions, principles, and procedures in a particular approach to inquiry" (Harding, quoted in Carter and Little, 2007, p.1317). More specifically, Schwandt considers a methodology the explication and definition of:

the kinds of problems that are worth Investigating, [...] what comprises a researchable problem, testable hypothesis, and so on, [...] how to frame a problem in such a way that it can be investigated using particular designs and procedures. (Schwandt, 2001, p.193)

The present methodology chapter has therefore the role of delineating the "particular designs and procedures" (Schwandt, 2001, p.193) that will be adopted to analyse the three case studies, in particular by describing how the research's onto-epistemological foundation "modifies methodology and justifies the knowledge produced" (Carter and Little, 2007, p.1317).



As highlighted in the introduction, the present research has a twofold goal. On one side, to trace the main characteristics, methods and practices in contemporary Western discourse of paranormal experiences and practices of otherworldly communications. To do so, it will analyse three main case studies – described below – that are considered representative of the field, and which allow for broad intertextual connections between some of the major epistemic trends in contemporary paranormal discourse. The case studies will be analysed from a qualitative, inductive point of view, with a methodology informed by sound studies and conducted with the application of the methodological “working concepts” of sound, resonance and radio, conceived as “action schemata that function as dynamic templates for thinking and understanding” (Slaby et al., 2019, p.27). On the other, the research aims to construct a methodology for the study of contemporary forms of occulture, a methodology grounded on the analysis of the case studies but that has the potential to be generalised to the broader field of paranormal studies.

In other words, two deeply interrelated questions move the whole research project: first, how is the paranormal conceived, experienced, practiced and shared in the period from the sixties to present days? And second, what could be a useful methodology to analyse it? Both these questions are concerned with the processual, interactive and ecological dynamics of the paranormal, rather than an attempt at explaining the causes of its emergence or the reasons behind ambiguous and often dubious accounts. As expressed in detail in the literature review chapter, the thesis’ methodological premises thus rely on a theoretical framework that specifically addresses such particular aspects of meaning making through embodied and affective interaction.

The research “is descriptive rather than foundational in explanatory terms” (Law, 2008, p.142). In accordance with the studies of the paranormal seen in Eaton (2020), Hunter (2015) and Holloway and Kneale (2008) in the literature review, this research it is not interested in the ‘why’ of the paranormal but rather, following John Law’s approach to social sciences:

it tells stories about ‘how’ relations assemble or don’t. As a form, one of several, of material semiotics, it is better understood as a toolkit for telling interesting

stories about, and interfering in, those relations. More profoundly, it is a sensibility to the messy practices of relationality and materiality of the world. (Law, 2008, p.142)

This thesis adapts this concept of material semiotics towards the search for a descriptive methodology capable of tracing the *how* of the paranormal processes, practices and materialities.

The study of paranormal accounts requires us to adopt at once a rigorous approach – to orient between the sparse, incomplete, dubious expressions of the experiences in the texts – and a methodological dynamism capable of following constructively the often irrational and contradictory aspects of the narrations, which are often the fulcrum of the whole account. Therefore, I here lay some fundamental tenets that will frame the epistemological and theoretical positions of the research. First of all, the paranormal experience will be analysed from a *non-reductionist* point of view. The research will thus adopt an agnostic position: the credibility and empirical validity of the supernatural account under examination are of no relevance for this study. For Law, reductionism means “to draw a line between two classes of phenomena by distinguishing those that are driven and those that drive. And claim that the behaviour of the latter is caused by the behaviour of the former” (Law, 1993, p.12). To overcome this risk, he proposes a *symmetrical* approach, in which “*everything* deserves explanation and, more particularly, that everything that you seek to explain or describe should be approached in the same way” (Law, 1993, p.9). This is true in any social research but particularly crucial when attempting at describing a mercurial and ambiguous field such as the paranormal discourse. The project recognises the necessity of taking into account – and, with critical mind, to take seriously – the most irrational, contradictory and unprovable claims of the paranormal experiences analysed, considered as necessary elements for the understanding of the processes at work.

Closely related to the previous tenet is the need to trace the internal dynamics of the paranormal as much as the external ones, conceived as two poles of a continuum rather than absolute oppositions. As Kripal declares:

Essentially what a paranormal experience is in this technical sense, is an event in the environment—in the physical environment—that corresponds often perfectly to a psychological state. So, consciousness and matter are interacting in ways that are extremely precise and often involve meaning and symbol and metaphor. (Kripal in Versluis, 2013, p.107)

The analysis of the experience will focus on the compenetrating between embodied, material and affective elements with the discursive, the narrative and the representational aspects that emerge through the (often fictionalised) texts that compose the case studies. The theoretical framework discussed above, with its adoptions of the flattening positions of agential realism and of Deleuze and Guattari's process philosophy, will help to overcome the otherwise insurmountable opposition between nature and culture. These will be analysed in their mutual resonance, interaction and transformation, with particular interest in the most transitory, intermediate states.

In this sense, the case studies will present fruitful situations in which the epistemological boundaries between embodied practice and representation are blurred. The main texts used in the analysis of the case studies – *The Stone Tape* teleplay, the book *Conjuring up Philip* (Owen and Sparrow, 1976), and the paranormal investigation web-series *Hellier* – all use representational, narrativised and creative tools to describe practice and at the same time *express* its affective dynamics. While an analysis of such texts makes it difficult to gather real world data on how practitioners perform and experience the paranormal, the chosen approach proves particularly useful in tracing the interpretation of affective experiences – often conceived as unexplainable or unspeakable – as well as how they are made sense of and then collectively shared. This allows for the identification of a discursive paradigm influencing the modes of practicing and feeling the paranormal, in the temporal and geographical span of this study.

At the centre of this approach there is the paranormal not conceived as an objective event nor as a psychological state, but understood as a process, a becoming, a continuous everchanging renegotiation of the territorial boundaries of the everyday, of imagination, and of reality. On one side, this means to shift the focus from the idea of paranormal entities, presences or phenomena, towards the centrality of *agency*, by definition the foundational component of the eerie (Fisher, 2017). On the other, it is

only in process, in motion that the paranormal experience can be analysed non-reductively and comprehensively. As mentioned, the interest is not so much on the why of the paranormal – conceived as an absolute alterity and transgression from reality – but instead *how* it emerges and develops *from* the everyday world and establishing which relationships with it.

Attempts at explaining the paranormal, by dissecting it and deconstructing it in its causal dynamics and its semiotic expressions certainly provide useful data for the analysis, but tend to overlook its most experiential, emotional and embodied dimensions. Law states that “there’s nothing outside the process”, and that all social processes are fundamentally autopoietic and recursive: “the social world is this remarkable emergent phenomenon: in its processes it shapes its own flows. Movement and the organisation of movement are not different” (Law, 1993, p.15). In fact, the research will conceptualise a ‘systemic’ form of the analysed experiences, incorporating at the same time the agencies, the material-discursive structures that allow the agents to act, as well as the very movements of agency: “the channels, the patterns and what’s channelled are not different” (Law, 1993, p.15).

### **3.1 Epistemological framework**

The three tenets outline a precise epistemological approach: a fundamentally realist position which however necessarily needs to take into account, from a constructivist point of view, the sociocultural dynamics that are indissolubly part of the paranormal experience. The paranormal itself, in fact, is here considered as the emergent phenomenon of heterogeneous interactions: relationalities between internal psychological dispositions and external phenomena, between cultural conditionings and material intensities. Traditionally, constructivist and realist epistemologies are seen as opposites and mutually exclusive, and many philosophical positions continue to establish radical separations between affect – the felt before any semiotic or representational conditioning – and discourse – the realm of language governing with absolute power experience, society and culture. However, scholars such as Wetherell criticises the “as-

sumption of a radical cut between affect and discourse” (Wetherell, 2013, p.355), instead advocating for the necessary consideration of the intertwinements, between the two. This position is found also in Latour, for whom:

Words and worlds do not represent two statues facing one another and marking the respective territories of two kingdoms —only to one of them will loyalty be sworn. Rather, words and worlds mark possible and not very interesting extremities, end points of a complex set of practices, mediations, instruments, forms of life, engagements, involvements through which new associations are generated. (Latour, 2003, p.39)

In particular, Latour proposes the concept of “compositionism” (Latour, 2003, p.40) instead of the traditional social constructivism, to stress that considering all facts as intrinsically constructed does not diminish their relevance by making them merely ‘fabricated’, but instead recognises the transitory, fragile and everchanging processes of knowing and doing they are part of. The present research follows Wetherell and Latour focusing on “an affective–discursive practice”, a “joint, coordinated, relational activity in which affect and discourse twine together” (Wetherell, 2013, p.363), by examining how occultural practitioners develop “distinctive and defining affective-discursive practices and how affective-discursive practices spatialise, demarcate and place” (Wetherell et al., 2015, p.60) the conceptualisation of the paranormal experience.

As a fundamental reference and inspiration for this research, Karen Barad’s formulation of agential realism further undermines taken for granted dualism between culture–nature as assumed as universal truths, declaring that “the separation of epistemology from ontology is a reverberation of these dualism” (Barad, 1996, p.175). They contest a “[c]artesian (inherent, fixed, universal) subject-object distinction” (Barad, 1996, p.175) at the same time undermining “conceptions which see reality as either prior to or outside of language. What is being described is our participation *within* nature” (Barad, 1996, p.175). In this sense the agential realist perspective will prove a particularly effective framework to study the paranormal by taking into account both the embodied, performative and affective dynamics narrated in the accounts, as well as the semiotic, cultural and narrative dimensions that accompany and frame every alleged paranormal experience.

Agential Realism also allows us to take distance from the unfruitful question about the empirical reality of alleged paranormal phenomena, as Barad's framework "provides an account of the simultaneously material and cultural nature of the ontology of the world. Saying that something is socially constructed doesn't mean that it isn't real - on the contrary [...] reality is itself material-cultural, [...] constructedness does not deny materiality" (Barad, 1996, p.181). Echoing Latour, Barad too conceives reality as "*constituted by the "between", the inseparability of nature-cultural / world-word / physical-conceptual / material-discursive*. Culture does not displace or replace nature, but neither do things exist outside of culture" (Barad, 1996, p.181, emphasis in the original).

### 3.2 Sonic methodologies

When confronted with the field of enquiry of this research, the onto-epistemological position outlined so far manifests the necessity for a methodology capable of tracing and analysing processes, interactions and relationalities expressed in accounts of particularly ineffable and transitory dynamics. The theoretical positions described above will be operatively applied into the research thanks to the focus on sound – and in particular on an ecological dimension of listening – that have been outlined above, in the literature review. As mentioned in the introduction, the connection between the sonorous and the vibratory with the field of the paranormal is particularly deep. There is in fact a tight relationship between the paranormal and sound, both materially – with a sonorous dimension that often precedes and prepares for the usually visually-charged apparition – and discursively – as sound has been often used from a metaphorical, symbolic or theoretical point of view to explain, hypothesise or debunk paranormal claims. Therefore, a methodology founded on sound will be particularly coherent and consistent with the object of study itself.

Methodologically, a focus on sound "generates and endorses sensory knowledge possibilities" (Voegelin, 2024, p.2), challenging "terms such as objectivity" (Voegelin, 2024, p.4) that visual-centred approaches tend to point at. It is for Voegelin capable of un-

veiling “a view on the relational, the in-between, and the entangled, which its experience makes accessible and through which it augments and transforms how and what we think we see” (Voegelin, 2024, p.4). There is therefore a focus on the ecological exchanges and interactions of inherently communicative processes that are developed through an embodied act of listening, as detailed by Di Scipio (2012). A new materialist position on sound is considered a fruitful way to access an “ontology of the event” (Cox, 2017, p.104), an “ontology of flux in which objects are merely temporary concretions of fluid processes” (Cox, 2017, p.103). It particularly relates to the agential realist position on the paranormal that the thesis aims to define, as a sonic epistemology “transforms the body from a given entity with a specified functionality and direction of activity to a construction site of exploration and connection” (Cox, 2003, p.3). These conceptualisations of sound strongly resonate with many of the discourses on supernatural events that will be proposed throughout the research.

Within the context of sound-centred research, a strong influence for the methodology of this thesis is Julian Henriques’ “thinking through sound” (Henriques, 2011, p.xv) methodological approach, formalised in his influential project on the socio-material dynamics of Kingston’s dancehall culture. For Henriques, the concept of sound has implications beyond the mere acoustics, arriving at encompassing a “way of thinking, a process of knowledge, and a gnosis” (Henriques, 2011, p.xvii). It is therefore a methodological tool used to trace materialities, sociocultural processes, technological mediations, from an embodied and at the same time discursive point of view, critically bringing “to the fore the value of auditory propagation as a mechanical process, as a model of a way of understanding that avoids being entirely bound up with language, notation and representation” (Henriques, 2011, p.xvii). Henriques’ methodology is highly relevant for this research. In fact, I will borrow and adapt to my field of enquiry Henriques’ employment of sound and vibration at once ontologically, epistemologically and methodologically, outlining “an auditory investigation, rather than just an investigation of audition” (xvii) which triangulates coherently and fruitfully the ‘mechanical’ materiality of sound diffusion, the ‘practical’, performative dimension of sound as lived culture, and the ‘theoretical’ “dynamic model for both raising questions about the world – as distinct from the way the trope of the visual image is often used to settle them” (Henriques, 2011, p.xviii).

More specifically, Henriques conceptualises a spectrum of the vibratory that is at once physical and social, and that is analytically divided into three main wavebands. The first is identified as the “*material* waveband of sounding propagated through the gaseous medium of the air” (Henriques, 2011, p.xxxii): it addresses sound in its materiality and potential for physical, embodied affectivity. The second waveband is the “*corporeal* waveband of the crew’s performance and the crowd’s participation” (Henriques, 2011, p.xxxii), where the sonic is connected to the communal energy and entrainments that are produced collectively at the party. Finally, the third, ‘longer’ waveband is the “sociocultural waveband” of the evolution and transformation of the whole dancehall scene. With this methodology, Henriques is able to bring together the material sub-sonic frequencies of the soundsystem’s bass with the rhythm of the music affecting the dancing bodies, with the collective circularity of the dancehall night, even arriving to the much lower frequency of the generational cycles of Kingston’s dancehall culture.

Although thematically very distant from this research, Henriques’ frequency-based thinking can be highly applicable to the context of paranormal practices as well, as both fields share important elements of embodiment, performance, affective relationship between subjects and spaces as well as a strong listening-centred dimension of the experience. In the following section, I will propose the principal structure of the methodology of this research, as an application of the epistemological and methodological positions explored so far, filtered through the ‘thinking through sound’ methodology and applied to a fundamental concept in the theory of vibrations and sound, that has a long-lasting and deep history within paranormal discourse as well: that of resonance.

### **The concept of resonance**

As mentioned in the introduction, the concept of resonance is the main category that will guide the analysis of my research. Resonance is a physical concept which describes the energetic amplification that occurs when a vibratory system is driven at a force oscillating at a frequency corresponding to its natural frequency of vibration. While pertaining specifically to the physics of vibration, the concept of resonance can be often found in the context of affect theories as a metaphor to model the processes of atmosphere emergence and affective modulations. For instance, Massumi explains



the relational and processual dynamics of affection in terms of resonance (Massumi, 2002, p.14). Indeed, when we read that “it is best to think of [sensation] as a resonation, or interference pattern” (Massumi, 2002, p.13), Massumi’s theorisation of affect assumes a particular relevance in my attempt to start from the sonic to develop a resonance-based theory of the experience of the eerie.

Similar uses of concepts related to resonance, sound and vibratory physics can be found in the writings of other researchers in the field of affect theories. Stewart, for example, conceptualises affective atmospheres as force fields to which subjects can be attuned, leading to recursive dynamics of affecting and being affected. Such affective relationalities are expressed by recurring to a sonic terminology: “An atmospheric fill buzzes with the resonance of nascent forms quickening or sloughing off, materialities pressing into the expressivity of something coming into existence” (Stewart, 2011, p.446). Moreover, Mühlhoff considers the dynamics of affective attunements as processes which share many structural properties with the physical concept of resonance, as he defines affect as a process which, like resonance, “(1) is a truly bi-directional coupling, (2) it constitutes an experiential quality of its own, and (3) is experienced immediately as force-like dynamics, not as categorical affects” (Mühlhoff, 2019, p.190).

Therefore, by drawing from the research on infant development by psychoanalytic theorist Daniel Stern, he proposes a new concept of ‘affective resonance’, to take advantage of the philosophical similarities between the two fields to transpose “the physical concept into the domain of an affect theoretical ontology” (Mühlhoff, 2019, p.192). The concept of affective resonance is therefore defined as:

a type of relational dynamics of affecting and being affected, characterized as a process of reciprocal modulation between interactants. Resonance is a relational and processual phenomenon. It is neither a singular affective “state” nor a one-sided transmission of affect, such as in contagion, but arises through a complex interplay between the affective dispositions [...] of multiple individuals and contextual factors within an affective arrangement. (Mühlhoff, 2019, p.189)

This relational understanding of resonance will be at the centre of my theoretical approach to the study of paranormal experiences, by employing it as an epistemological tool in the analysis of practices – such as séances, ghost hunting and paranormal

investigations – which are performed to allow for the production of specific interactive spaces and relational dynamics from which the sensation of the eerie can emerge. Moreover, I employ the concept of resonance as a model of social interaction and cultural circulation in the context of the emergence of communities of practices around shared supernatural-related discourses.

To summarise, the concept of resonance will be utilised as a *working concept*: “dynamic templates for articulation – formations of significant elements that can be put to use in intellectual practice, for instance, as schemata for constellating and framing reality in specific ways” (Slaby et al., 2019, p.30). The concept will therefore be considered a “framing [device] that [is] adaptable to a range of different domains and subject matters and capable of different kinds of uptake and case-based specification” (Slaby et al., 2019, p.31). While sound studies and conceptualisations of ecologies of listening compose the foundation of this research’s theoretical framework, the specific use of the concept of resonance – over those of sound and vibration, for example – is born from multiple reasons, strictly related to the epistemological positions discussed above. First of all, the choice of resonance over sound has the role of extending the scope of the phenomena beyond the solely acoustic, to encompass instead the whole spectrum of oscillatory and vibratory energies – for instance radio, electromagnetic, sub-auditory waves and so on – which are however still in close relation with the experiences of listening and embodied feeling portrayed in the case studies.

Second, to talk in terms of resonance gives the opportunity to stress the relational and interactive dimension of vibratory phenomena. Resonance, in fact, defines the vibratory energy as a medium of interaction between bodies, as processes of “affect and be affected” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, p.261) that is crucial to the investigation of the paranormal experience. Moreover, the movement, the process and the mutual energetic exchange that the concept of resonance expresses highlights the communicative dimension inherent in any sonic mediation (Truax, 1984): this will prove to be extremely relevant for the research, as the paranormal experience is conceived first and foremost as a relational and interactive process of communication.

Third, as mentioned above, the concept of resonance is widely used beyond the field of physics, to express relational processes in the contexts of social studies, economy,

politics and more. It will therefore allow us to adopt a consistent approach to shift between accounts of alleged physical phenomena to the critical sociocultural implication of the paranormal discourse, in accordance with the material-discursive approach advocated by agential realism. The concept of resonance will therefore be intended in a similar vein to Henriques' 'thinking through sound' approach. It is not only a physical concept or a metaphor but also a:

philosophical resonance [...] concerned with relationality, that is, mixing, mingling and synthesis as well as analysis, similarities as well as differences, and continuities as well as dichotomies. [...] [T]his way of philosophising exploits a vocabulary of auditory mechanisms and a repertoire of models and metaphors from sound and listening, in the way traditional philosophy has relied on visual support. (Henriques, 2011, p.xxx)

In this sense, the abstract concept of resonance will be actualised by adopting the theory behind the analogue radio receiver – as the quintessential resonance-based technology – as the operative model that will inform the very structure of the research, as well as the radio's basic building blocks as methodological principles to orient and direct the analysis. The next section will clarify this methodological use of the radio receiver – and in particular of the most basic and primordial form of radio receiver, the crystal set – in the context of the research here conducted.

### **3.4 The crystal radio model**

The resonance concept – as an abstract representation of relationality and interaction happening at a waveform level – is here methodologically modelled and rendered operative by utilising the structure of the crystal set radio receiver, one of the most direct and fundamental empirical applications of the theory of resonance. More specifically, the model here proposed is a methodological application of the circuitual and functioning structure of a crystal radio receiver, one of the technologies that most fully and directly exploits the physical phenomenon of resonance. Moreover, the cultural importance of radio communication in the history of the last two centuries makes the crystal set more than a mere communication medium, but instead a concept highly metaphorical, imaginative and socioculturally charged. In this section, the principal

characteristics and functioning of the crystal receiver technologies will be outlined, to contextualise the reasons why it has been chosen as a methodological model. Successively, the three main components that compose the receiver will be described, with a focus on how they will be abstracted from the technological/mediated domain to become working concepts pragmatically used to direct and orient the analysis of the case studies.

The radio receiver is an archetypical telecommunication medium, expressing the most foundational concepts of information theory – sender, receiver, channel, noise, interference, and so on – in a highly direct and comprehensible process. Moreover, the crystal radio set is tightly connected to the modern history of occulture and spirit communication, and multiple times will be directly mentioned in the case studies as well. The history of radio technology has in fact strong relationships with the emergence of psychical research and paranormal discourses not only from a theoretical but also from a practical point of view. Enns, in this sense, highlights the “circular causality” (Enns, 2008, p.138) happening in late nineteenth century between scientific research on electromagnetic transmissions, psychical research and spiritualist discourse. As Sconce (2000) has demonstrated in his seminal research on haunted media, radio has been widely used as an actual device to tap into supernatural phenomena. In particular the crystal set itself is a circuit that appears in the pioneering experiments conducted by Latvian parapsychologist Raudive as a way to allegedly communicate with disembodied spirits (Raudive, 1971) (fig.1). Radio will be at the same time the object of research – how resonant phenomena of sound and vibratory energies are involved in the accounts – the epistemological tool – thinking through sound in its materiality and communicative dynamics, tracing relationality, interaction – as well as methodology – a research founded on material-discursive processes.

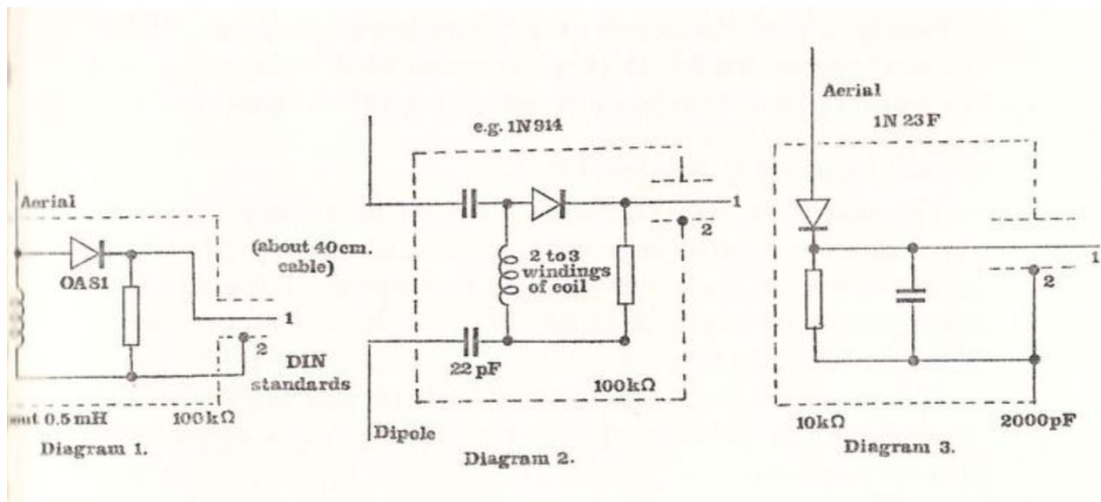


Figure 1 - Raudive's radio receivers (Raudive, 1971, p.341).

## Introduction to the crystal set

The crystal set is one of the earliest forms of radio receivers, widely used in the early days of wireless radio communication and one of the major contributors to the global diffusion of radio. It became obsolete in the early 1920s with the introduction of vacuum tubes and amplified radios, but never entirely disappeared. In fact, it can be found – with the name of Foxhole Radio – as a makeshift device built by soldiers during WWII, and it is recently commonly built by DIY enthusiasts or in educational workshops settings. In the context of this research, it becomes a valuable methodological concept not only for its historical relevance, but in particular for the simplicity of its structure and of the resonant processes that govern its functioning, as well as the already mentioned connections they have with occulture.

The principal characteristic of the Crystal set is the lack of external power supply. It is in fact a passive receiver: its circuit is entirely driven by the energy provided by the radio waves affecting the device. The crystal set is characterised by an extreme low fidelity – low selectivity and sensitivity, meaning an overall difficulty in tuning to a specific frequency and to being able to capture weaker signals. These apparent flaws, however, determine a very ambiguous and unpredictable listening experience in which sounds, noises and interferences – of human as well as natural, atmospheric origins – often strongly affect the vocal or musical broadcasts that are intended to be received,

contributing to the mysterious and uncanny connotations that have often been given to the device in the context of paranormal research (Jürgenson, 2004).

The crystal set is designed to receive Amplitude Modulated (AM) radio signals: a widely used and old technique of transmitting (audio or data) information across long distances by modulating the amplitude of a high frequency sine wave – the carrier – with the waveform of the message signal to be sent. The resulting modulated signal irradiates spherically from the transmitting station's aerial, it interacts with the atmosphere, the ionosphere and the Earth's ground, eventually reaching a radio receiver able to detect it and decode the original sound wave. This is the function of the crystal set, the rudimentary circuit acting as receiver thanks to the mutual interaction of three main electro-magnetic components. The first component is the antenna, which is exposed to the radio waves travelling to the atmosphere and transforms them into electrical signals. The Antenna is connected to the Tuner, that isolates specific incoming frequencies from the whole spectrum of radio waves captured by the antenna. The detector, that demodulates the incoming signal by retrieving the original audio frequency-level information, which can be eventually used to drive a loudspeaker or an earpiece, to transduce the signal into sound. These three components express three different but interrelated elements of the radio process, and they will be translated into the three fundamental stages of the methodological model used in this research. Here, the three components will be described in detail, with pragmatic references on how they will be operatively employed in the analysis.

## **Antenna**

The first component of the crystal set is the antenna, a piece of conductive material usually in the form of a metal stick or wire. Its role is simply to be exposed to the radio waves travelling the atmosphere: when a radio wave passes through the antenna, its electromagnetic oscillation interacts with the electrons within the antenna's conductive material, producing an alternated electric current. This current displays a waveform which reproduces the original radio wave; the antenna, therefore, transduces radio signals into electrical signals. Moreover, being effectively the component that transforms AM radio waves into electricity, the antenna is also the component that produces

the energy that drives the whole process of radio reception in a passive circuit such as the crystal set.

The antenna acts as an opening to the electromagnetic field invisibly inhabiting the atmosphere. Conceptually, there is no signal interpretation involved in the antenna, only an unbounded relationality with the surrounding happening through the medium of radio waves. In the thesis, the antenna section operates a similar opening: it begins the analysis by broadly exploring the spectrum of influences, contexts and historical trajectories that are considered the principal source of the 'energy' – influences and inspirations – from which the paranormal experience described in the case study would then emerge. Therefore, the antenna functions as an introduction and contextualisation to the case study, a – necessarily partial and incomplete – scoping of the event's discursive, cultural, technological and scientific milieu, to highlight intertextual connections with other relevant texts and to place the case study within the historical development of the paranormal episteme. The antenna will lay down the fundamental theories, hypotheses and representations that will be then channelled through the practices and the discourses described in the case studies. For this reason, the antenna section will not follow a linear development but will be rather composed of multiple subsections, each outlining a thematic, historical or technical aspect of the occultural paradigm of the case study. In particular, the discourses proposed in the antenna would then prove to be important foundations to understand the ways in which the paranormal experience emerges from the everyday, as explored by the Tuner section.

## **Tuner**

Connected to the antenna, in the crystal receiver, is the tuner. In its simplest form, it is composed by a coil of conductive wire – an inductance – connected in parallel to a capacitor. The two elements arranged in this configuration constitute a resonator, a device behaving akin to an electrical version of a tuning fork: it is capable of oscillating only at a specific frequency determined by the value of the two components that are often manually variable. Therefore, whenever the electrical signal produced in the antenna oscillates at the resonant frequency of the tuner, an electric charge begins to oscillate back and forth between the two plates of the capacitor through the coil, producing a high impedance at the poles of the capacitor itself. In other words, when the

incoming carrier signal oscillates at the tuner's resonant frequency, the tuner itself begins to resonate, letting the input signal pass through. However, when the incoming signal is carried by a sinusoid at a frequency different from the tuner's resonance, the tuner will block the signal, preventing it from passing through and instead discharging it to ground.

The tuner operates a selection, band-pass filtering the incoming chaotic and noisy spectrum of waves coming from the antenna and letting pass only the one at its resonant frequency. At the same time, it could be said that the tuner is the component that effectively constructs a specific and definite communication channel, by limiting the broad influence of the antenna to a narrower portion of the electromagnetic spectrum, ideally allowing a single frequency to pass through. However, tuning does not mean communicating, but only the opening to its potentiality: the tuner, in other words, creates the conditions for mediation, for receiving a specific, known signal instead of others. It is fundamentally an operation on and of agency: to instantiate a listening, a 'being in listening' that creates constructive boundaries, narrowing down the reception to a determined resonant frequency. It is only through this process that a specific message, among the many populating the electromagnetic atmosphere, can be received. From an agential realist perspective, the tuner is an apparatus of mediation that operates an agential cut – thus conceptually determining a distinction between signal and noise – by its very material configuration. The resonant frequency of the tuner is determined by the material interaction between its two components, the capacitor and the inductance. There is therefore a conceptualisation of performance, agency and practice inherent in the process of tuning, as tuning necessarily is an active process that is constitutive of the communicative event *in potentia*.

In the research, the tuner component of the chapter speaks of the complex processes and practices of establishing an experiential, experimental or performative apparatus that, given the raw materials provided by the antenna section – theories, inspirations, background, discourse – determines the conditions for the charging of spaces, situations and events with paranormal meaning, effectively allowing for the emergence of the paranormal experience. In the tuner, the textual analysis will be focused on finding the descriptions, representations and expressions of the events that made the experience of the eerie. It will search for description of practices, analysing the resonance-



based processes that govern them, how they establish interactions with other subjects and with the surrounding environment. The tuner, in this sense, will look at what happens before and in preparation for the actual paranormal experience, with particular focus on resonant phenomena – sonorous or vibratory – and resonance-like processes – attunements, relationships, ecological interactions, correspondences and sensations of synchronicity.

In other words, the tuner will be employed to answer the question on what creates the conditions for the paranormal experience to happen, and with what specific processes of deterritorialisation from the ordinary, taken for granted world, towards the definition of a new territory, governed by different affordances and capacities of interacts, understood by the experiencers in supernatural terms. However, the tuner only creates the conditions for a reception: *something* passing through its output is not yet a message but only the demonstration that a communication channel is opened. What is passing through is not yet decoded or interpreted; it is instead only a pure movement: it could be a message, an interference, or just an affective intensity. Translating this to the research domain, the tuner section of the chapter explores the affective, intensive and embodied occurrences that are not yet interpreted as paranormal experiences – in particular by framing them within a recognised discourse or narrative – but only the experiences that open up the eerie question of agency. For such question to find an answer, and the experience be considered and shared as paranormal, there is the need for a further process, an interpretative, representational one. One that is specifically analysed through the third and last component of the radio model: the detector.

## **Detector**

When signals pass through the tuner, the detector component is responsible for the *rectification* of the signal, its demodulation: the information is extracted from the amplitude modulated carrier, generating an audio-range electric signal whose waveform represents the original sound message. The detector exploits the rectifying properties of certain crystal materials – usually galena or pyrite – that under certain conditions are able to work akin the modern diodes, thus allowing electric current to travel only in one direction, letting only the positive part of the alternate signal pass through. The resulting electric waveform at the output of the detector crystal is then used to drive a

piezoelectric earpiece (in the case of passive crystal receivers) or a loudspeaker, thus converting the electric signal into sound pressure, making it hearable by the subject at the receiving end of the communication chain.

Conceptually, the detector is the component that receives the yet-to-be interpreted signal coming from the tuner, decrypting the message that was hidden in the amplitude of a simple sinusoidal carrier. Only by knowing the modulation method, in this case AM, can the signal be demodulated and thus *understood* by the receiver. There is therefore a fundamental semiotic scheme that must be known and adhered to: in this case, the one of amplitude modulation. Methodologically, the detector searches for the semiotic, narrative and hermeneutical dimensions within the case studies' texts, the processes of making sense of the paranormal experience. The detector section will focus on the stages that follow the paranormal experience therefore tracing the representations and the narrativisations operated by the subjects involved in the case studies. Particular relevance will be given, in this sense, to the use of technology and scientific theories – usually resonance-based – as experimental apparatuses to reterritorialise the rationality-defying affective experience within a structure paradigm of reality.

The detector unveils how the material-discursive resonances generated at the level of the tuner are interpreted and made sense through language, art, or storytelling. There is in fact a strong narrative focus to the hermeneutical analysis of the detector, which takes into the account and criticises the intrinsic fictional nature of paranormal experience. It is however a fictionalisation process that does not necessarily mean fraudulent fabrication, but rather an expression of the experience through words, images and sounds in order to share it collectively. As part of this, there is an interest in how the paranormal experience triggers the construction of a theory, a hypothesis that can sometimes even lead to the development of the paranormal episteme at large. This collective, cultural dimension is one of the crucial functions of the detector, an element of the analysis that is reflected at the level of the radio circuitry as well. In fact, the original passive crystal receiver became obsolete with the introduction of the vacuum tube, a component that substituted the old crystal detector by maintaining the rectifying property while being able to act as amplifier, through the process of a regenerative feedback circuit.

The introduction of the detector-amplifier was therefore responsible for a new collective, communal dimension of radio listening: the heightened power of the signal allowed for the loudspeaker connection, with the sound irradiating in a room instead of the solitary listening on headphones. Furthermore, high amplification values can bring the device to self-oscillation, whenever the regenerative feedback loop recursively amplifies the internal background noise of the receiver to the point of making it produce a parasitical signal at the device's resonant frequency. In this case, the radio receiver begins to behave itself as an oscillator, and the antenna begins to radiate itself an electromagnetic field, that is able to interfere with nearby devices as well<sup>2</sup>. Amplification, transmission, interference and circulation are technological concepts that will be translated to the cultural studies domain in the detector section, allowing for an analysis of the communal, collective and cultural processes present within the case study itself. It will be the opportunity for an exploration of the active role of the case studies within occulture and popular culture at large. These will be descriptive and consciously non-exhaustive sections, in which intertextual connections with other cases and accounts will be traced, investigating on the impact of the case study on paranormal discourse, cultural texts, fiction and so on.

### **3.5 Structure of the case study analysis**

The aforementioned radio model will direct and structure the analysis of the three case studies. The three conceptual areas that the antenna, the tuner and the detector represent will create specific vectors directing the analysis of the case studies, organising the study in ordered principles, making the analysis coherent and consistent. The chapter structure itself will therefore reproduce the tripartite form of the radio model: all three chapters will present, aside a brief introduction, an antenna section, a tuner section and a detector section. This structure will allow for a 'vertical' and for a 'horizontal' reading of each case study's analysis. Vertically, the chapter can be read as an in-depth investigation of the specific case study, unveiling relevant

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<sup>2</sup> This is the reason why active radios were forbidden during in the field operations in World War II, causing a remediation of the older passive crystal set as a safer, DIY device.

aspects of the ways paranormal experiences are expressed and conceived. Horizontally, each subsection of the radio model – antennas, tuners and detectors – can be read as multiple thematic threads running across the different analyses, allowing to highlight how specific material-discursive aspects of the process of the paranormal at large emerge from the case studies. This, in particular in the conclusions, will allow us to compare the three corresponding sections to build a comprehensive and ‘exhaustive’ idea of the radio sorcery process, as well as to identify every component of the radio model as methodological sub-concept that can be used as an analytical tool for more cases.

The first chapter is dedicated to the analysis of the 1972 BBC programme *The Stone Tape*, a television drama that represents, in a fictional form, some of the most relevant approaches on hauntings in contemporary western culture and in the history of psychical research: namely, residual haunting, psychometry and the so-called stone tape theory. Moreover, the play is a relevant case study as, after its release, it began to be treated almost as a theory-fictional work by paranormal investigators which started to utilise the theory that the characters diegetically construct throughout the story as a proper hypothesis to explain haunting phenomena, nowadays commonly referred to as ‘the stone tape theory’. The case study will allow us to trace the material-discursive resonant dynamics involved in the discourse on haunted physical spaces, as well as the conceptualisation of paranormal experiences as embodied ecological interactions with socio-culturally charged places, at prominently sonic, vibratory and, most of all, acoustic resonant points of perception.

The second case study is the so-called Philip experiment, a parapsychological study conducted in the seventies by the Toronto Society for Psychical Research, as a way to demonstrate the psychical and telepathic nature of Spiritualist phenomena. The experiment makes a representative case study for the resonance it had – and continues to have – among communities of parapsychologists and paranormal practitioners alike, which often refer to it as one of the most credible and well documented experiences in the realm of psychical research. The analysis, in fact, will be focused on the main book written by two of the members (Owen and Sparrow, 1976), the numerous publications that the group released during the several years of the experiment – mostly through their self-produced journal *Horizons*, and the

proceedings of the various conferences on the theme they organised between 1972 and 1976 – as well as some television appearances and a self-produced documentary, all widely available in the digital domain. The case study is important because it will allow us to trace the concept of haunting as applied in a séance situation and within psychokinetic and telepathic epistemes, both very relevant in seventies' occulture. The haunted space in this case will therefore emerge as a performative space, and the experience will be predominantly a group, collective one. In this case too, material resonances as well as symbolic resonance-like processes will be taken into particular consideration, and will form the fundamental and foundational concepts for the whole experiment.

The third and last case study is the independent documentary series *Hellier* (2019), as a representative case of the most recent discourses on paranormal investigation. The series – which follows a group of people in their investigation on UFO and poltergeist disturbances in rural Kentucky – gained a vast popularity among paranormal communities online, producing an ongoing debate around its themes, its places and its novel approach to the field of paranormal research. In contrast with the traditional search for physical proof of the paranormal, *Hellier* emphasises peripheral perceptions and feelings emerging from atmospheric attunements with place. In *Hellier*, sound and vibration play a crucial role as mediators of affective interactions with the environment, often through the employment of sound-based technologies such as audio recorders, radios and musical instruments. In the chapter I trace the sonic and vibratory ecologies of *Hellier* in order to highlight how the atmosphere of the paranormal emerges through a resonance process between the material dimension of the on-site explorations and the discursive re-enactment of the lore of the investigated places. The case study will allow for a broader analysis of the cultural and collective real-world impact of such fictionalised pieces of entertainment, highlighting the massive role of audience participation through social media that is an integral and constitutive part of the whole experience portrayed in *Hellier*. It is a series whose cultural relevance is tangible among paranormal communities and beyond, becoming, I will argue in the detector section, the representative demonstration of a recent, resonance-based conceptualisation of the paranormal, which even assumes the traits of a counterculture.

## 4. *The Stone Tape*

### 4.1 Introduction

This first analytical chapter begins the research with the investigation of *The Stone Tape*, a sci-fi/horror television play produced by the BBC in 1972 as part of the traditional Christmas ghost stories programmes, a series inaugurated by a short film based on M.R. James' *Oh, Whistle, and I'll come to you, my Lad*, directed by Johnathan Miller in 1968, and continued until 1978. *The Stone Tape* was directed by Peter Sasdy – who worked extensively at the BBC and as a cult horror director for Hammer Film Production Ltd – and boasted some notorious British actors of the time, such as Jane Asher, Michael Bryant, and Iain Cuthbertson, among others. However, *The Stone Tape* owes most of its popularity to the screenplay by Nigel Kneale, a seminal TV writer who already had a high reputation as a horror and sci-fi screenwriter, thanks the success of his *Quatermass* serials, airing from the late fifties through the early sixties. *The Stone Tape* shares with Kneale's previous screenplays the preoccupation with the relationship between present-day technologies and the communication with otherworldly agencies buried from remote pasts (Augood, 2015). It is a theme previously explored in *Quatermass and the Pit*, that is brought with *The Stone Tape* to its narrative and conceptual extremes in a “hybrid sub-genre, which synthesises science fiction and the ghost story; ostensibly paranormal phenomena are rationalised by advanced science” (Broughton, 2006).

*The Stone Tape* tells the story of the Research and Development team of a British technology company, Ryan Electrics, after they move to their new headquarter, a formerly abandoned late-Victorian mansion completely renovated to host scientific laboratories and offices. The team, led by Peter Brock (Michael Bryant), is researching on the development of a new recording medium, based on “digital crystals” (Kneale, 1972), which would surpass the common magnetic tape. As soon as they settle in the new building, the programmer and unwitting sensitive Jill (Jane Asher) begins to experience haunting phenomena in a storage room which, for mysterious reasons, has not been refurbished yet. Once the apparition is acknowledged by other

colleagues as well, who encountered the same phenomena – footsteps, screams and the brief appearance of the ghost of a young woman – they begin scientifically analysing the room. They discover that the ghost is in reality the psychical trace of a past tragic event imprinted in the very chemical composition of the granite stones that form the room's walls: a recording which continuously loops the same event, which is picked up by the characters' minds. The scientists therefore realise that the 'ghost' could be the key to develop the new recording medium they are researching. They thus engage in a series of scientific experiments in the room, to unveil the nature of the haunting and to understand how to control and reproduce its processes. These experiments, however, have an unexpected and dramatic effect: they erase the surface layer of the ghostly recording, paving the way for the release of formless, millennia-old entities buried in the ancient stones. Eventually, this would lead to the tragic death of the protagonist Jill, forced by such malevolent entities to re-enact the same death of the woman whose memories were initially stored in the stones.

What makes *The Stone Tape* a relevant case study for this research is the close dialogue that it diegetically establishes between a fictional ghost story and the methodologies of psychical research on hauntings and apparitions. While this research focuses on the ways in which the paranormal is (sonically) practiced and experienced in the post-1960s Anglophone world, the relevance of *The Stone Tape* as a case study lies precisely in its representational dimension: in how it fictionalises accounts of haunting experiences and the modes of their scientific investigation. The teleplay skilfully brings together several of the most influential and enduring theories in the field of psychical research – such as the 'residual' theory of hauntings (Flammarion, 1924), the *psychometric* concept of mind-matter interaction (Lethbridge, 1961), and the active role of the experiencer in apparitional phenomena. These ideas, which will be explored in this chapter, all emerged in the mid-nineteenth century as foundational approaches to psychical research, and continue to be questioned, adapted, and applied to contemporary understandings of haunting phenomena.

*The Stone Tape*, however, does more than just synthesise multiple theories of hauntings; it also represents the practices, techniques, and technologies characteristic of paranormal research from its Victorian inception through the first half of the twentieth century. The teleplay depicts not only the haunting experience itself but also the

construction of theories in-the-making, a performative reenactment of sonic-based experiments and tools employed by real-life paranormal investigators to explore alleged spectral spaces: tone generators, recorders, energy sensors, and more. While these practices predate the BBC teleplay – as will be shown in the Antenna section – Kneale remediates them by adapting them to the emerging digital technologies of his time. The result is a compelling innovation within the genre of British folk horror (Rolinson and Devlin, 2008) adapted to a new technological episteme.

The reasons why *The Stone Tape* can provide useful information on how haunting phenomena have been experienced and described since the early 1970s lies in its complex interplay between fictional representation and real-world influence. In fact, the teleplay has shaped the interpretive frameworks, the methodological approaches, and the performative dispositions of countless paranormal investigators in the decades since its release. As it will be described in the Detector section, *The Stone Tape*'s legacy in both the United Kingdom and the United States is particularly evident in the way practitioners began referring to the old theories depicted in the play as 'Stone Tape Theory' – a term that remains widely used today (Hill, 2017; Townsend, 2021). Despite its fictional nature, *The Stone Tape* has functioned as a quasi-textbook for generations of paranormal researchers, who have drawn inspiration from its story to guide their investigations into hauntings. This influence can be found in the popularity of the notion of hauntings as residues of traumatic past events, as well as in the conceptualisation of apparitions as intrinsically tied to the architectural and spatial dimensions of place. Moreover, *The Stone Tape* has directly shaped the practices employed by contemporary paranormal investigators. As it will be discussed in the *Hellier* chapter, techniques such as the production of audio tones to stimulate spatial resonance, the use of recording and playback, as well as the acoustic analysis of haunted environments are now common procedures in the field.

At the heart of *The Stone Tape*'s history is therefore an epistemological feedback loop, wherein lived experience and previous investigative practice inform fictional representation, which then returns – remediated and transformed – to influence real-world practices in the post-1970s occulture. This loop operates the emergence of meaning and practice at an hyperstitional level: the generation of a 'stone tape theory' of the haunt-



ing experience which grows and circulates independently from both its nineteenth century's psychical research origins and the BBC teleplay. For these reasons, *The Stone Tape* will be treated here as a form of theory-fiction (Fisher, 2018): its representations of paranormal investigations will not be analysed as mere narrative devices but as *practices*, inspiring and defining real-world occultural engagements with (and within) resonant spaces.

In such a liminal context, in between the representation and the reenactment, the technical and the production history of *The Stone Tape* assumes a crucial importance in the analysis conducted below. In this sense, in a recent interview (NewEmpressMagazine, 2013) director Sasdy describes in detail the production of *The Stone Tape*, which he stresses should not be considered a film but rather a television play. It was in fact created with the methods of a live play production, with on-site acting captured by four cameras, shooting live with little to no post-production. The shootings were carried out by a so-called “outside broadcast unit” (NewEmpressMagazine, 2013), a troupe specialised in open air TV sport events and recorded on the medium of videotape, a typical technique employed by the BBC between the sixties and the end of the seventies. Based on analogue magnetic tape, the videotape technology “reformulates the aesthetics of drama and the organization of production in various ways” towards an “as if live” (Jacobs quoted in McNaughton, 2014, p.390) approach which results in the “[t]he effect of immediacy, of a directness and spontaneity which comes to signify authenticity, is one of the characteristics of the specific forms of realism in television drama” (Jacobs quoted in McNaughton, 2014, p.391).

However, the live play approach – sharing similarities with theatrical productions – comes with limitations and restrictions in terms of the production pipeline, entirely planned in advance by director Sasdy with the accurate scheduling of camera cues: it can be therefore said that *The Stone Tape* story unfolds dramaturgically rather than cinematographically, an aspect that will prove crucial for the analysis conducted below. Another relevant aspect is the almost complete lack of postproduction: the editing was done live during the tightly timed recordings, and any visual effect was played live and mixed with the video channels coming in real time from the cameras. The same modus

operandi defines the audio track as well: the music and the sound effects were carefully played in the mixing room synced to the actor's play.

The audio track will prove to be particularly important in the expression of the apparitional events themselves, as well as in the very processes through which the possibility of the haunting is gradually constructed in the play. This is carried out with a very accurate management of the live sound, its acoustic reverberation, and the electroacoustic sound design curated by Desmond Briscoe and Glynis Jones at the BBC Radiophonic Workshop<sup>3</sup>. While the Workshop was previously dedicated exclusively to the composition and sound design in programmes and plays for radio, it was Nigel Kneale himself who first involved the workshop in a television production, when he commissioned them to produce the “‘Martian crowd chatter’ and ‘quick glunks’” (Tompkins, 2019) for his famous *Quatermass and the Pit*. In *The Stone Tape*, the sound design is a further evolution and representative example of the Workshop's seminal contribution to the definition of the auditory tropes of horror and sci-fi fiction through their application of analogue synthesis and traditional *musique concrète* techniques (Christodolou, 2018, p.108) – such as tape manipulation, analogue effects of delay, reverberations, ring modulation, and so on – effectively used to express themes such as the subconscious, the alien and in general what is visually unrepresentable.

The sonic dimension in *The Stone Tape* displays a tight relationship with the diegesis of the play, effectively driving the representation of the material processes that are considered – in the diegetic theorisation of haunting – the actual sources for the emergence of the supernatural. Sound and resonant phenomena are in fact the principal media through which the characters experience the haunting, in particular regarding specific ecological interactions that acoustics, reverberations and echoes establish between the humans and the non-human haunted walls within which the story unfolds. In this sense, *The Stone Tape* efficaciously exhibits in narrative form some of the commonest sonic processes often described in claimed real-life accounts

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<sup>3</sup> For a detailed history of the workshop in the context of horror TV production see, for instance, Christodoulou (2018) and Niebur (2010).

of haunting experiences, a partial and incomplete outline of which will be described in the following signals captured in the Antenna section.

## 4.2 Antenna

This Antenna section focuses on some relevant theories originated within the psychical research of the second half of the nineteenth century, which *The Stone Tape* represents in fictional form. First, the Antenna will outline some typical accounts of haunting phenomena from the literature of the field, with particular interest on their acoustic dimension, which will prove influential for the representation of the apparition in *The Stone Tape*. Successively, the Antenna will highlight some relevant theorisations on the nature and processes of haunting pertaining to psychical research, in order to provide the reference for the wide network of concepts that the teleplay summarises under the idea of the stone tape. These involve various conceptualisations of hauntings and poltergeist phenomena, as well as numerous interpretative approaches centred around ideas of sound, vibration and resonance as onto-epistemological foundations to explain the sensation of the eerie.

As discussed in the methodology chapter, the Antenna section has the purpose to trace these discourses, concepts and texts that will prove to be crucial to understand the (oc)cultural milieu within which *The Stone Tape* emerges from, and the modes of the experience of the paranormal that will be at the centre of the subsequent Tuner analysis. The Antenna will therefore lay the thematic foundations for the Tuner section's analysis on how the TV play represents some archetypical modes of the construction of the eerie in haunted spaces. In particular, the Antenna will first outline some recurring trajectories in modern accounts of haunting experiences, with particular emphasis on non-visual, haptic and sonic dynamics. Then, it will conduct a broad survey on the recent history of the theorisations, explanations and hypotheses produced by psychical researchers and paranormal investigations that heavily influenced the diegetic, fictionalised resonance-based theory of haunting constructed by the characters in *The Stone Tape*, whose in-depth analysis will be carried out in the Detector section.

### ***The Stone Tape* as representative of the haunting trope**

Accounts and narratives of spontaneous experiences of haunting in modern times are usually characterised by a strong visual dimension, which most often represents the climactic event in the experience: the unequivocal realisation of the irruption of the supernatural in an otherwise ordinary scenario. The visual usually intervenes in terms of objective presence – such as in the case of an *apparition* – or as an impossible absence – such as in poltergeists’ manifestations of objects and furniture behaving autonomously as moved by an unrevealed agency. The phenomenon of haunting, in other words, tends to culminate in a manifestation of the weird: an absolute ontological impossibility that undermines any shared understanding of reality (Fisher, 2017). However, before the irruption of the weird deeply unsettles the taken for granted rules and affordances of the place, accounts of hauntings often describe a varied phenomenology made of subtle feelings of presence, unexplainable peripheral perceptions which are not confirmed by any visual clue and are instead modulated by ambiguous haptic and auditory intensities. Sonic and vibratory phenomena seem to have the recurrent role of preceding and preparing for the apparition: they are usually not yet considered as supernatural events in themselves, but instead trigger the eerie “question of the agency of the immaterial and the inanimate” (Fisher, 2017, p.11).

These auditory phenomenologies often present a strong spatial connotation, carrying ecological aspects that are often abstracted sensations of presence unframed by shared representational forms. For instance, in Crowe’s *The Night Side of Nature* (1866), among the earliest instances of a modern approach to the paranormal, we can read:

I felt and heard, though I could not see anybody, that some one was moving about the room; these sounds were accompanied by a cool wind, though the place was closely shut up. (Crowe, 1866, p.211)

The sounds of someone moving in the place – ordinary sounds rendered unsettling by the lack of visual confirmation – are described as “felt and heard”, and accompanied by a cool wind: the auditory dimension is tightly connected with felt sensations of presence which are not univocally sensorially defined, but instead dissolved into a network of subtle and peripheral spatial interactions.

More recently, Gauld and Cornell’s classic text on poltergeists (1979) reports a detailed account which is described as representative of the commonest dynamics of haunting:

[I] felt there was something wrong with the house. [...] It was nothing one could put one’s finger on. Something was not right. I felt as if a hostile presence was pervading the house. (Gauld and Cornell, 1979, p.285)

Once more there is the reference to a sensation of presence, described not as a clearly recognisable situation, but as an ill-defined atmospheric feeling, an “emotion poured out spatially” (Schmitz, 2011, p.247). The report proceeds, and such sensation is followed by peculiar auditory events:

when I was working in the pantry I heard a creaking noise like someone moving on the stairs. However I assumed at the time that the sound was due to the wood warping with changes in humidity (Gauld and Cornell, 1979, p.285)

Once again, we have walking sounds which are strongly spatially connoted. However, the perceptual events are still interpreted as something which is potentially explainable in natural terms. Moreover, this liminal phase is characterised by bodily sensations of temperature variation:

The first inexplicable phenomenon took place when I was decorating upstairs. [...] For no apparent reason I suddenly felt hot all over for a few seconds. I moved further along the landing in the course of my work and felt very hot again. Within a few seconds my temperature went back to normal. (Gauld and Cornell, 1979, p.285)

It is interesting to notice how this specific event is described as the “first inexplicable phenomenon”. As noted above, auditory events do not immediately trigger a supernatural imagery. What is strange and unsettling is not in the sound itself but

rather in its unexplainable spatialisation and in its contextual articulation with the position of the listener. The sounds are usually described as coming from multiple positions in space, while never frontally. Van Elferen describes this as a “dorsal” (Van Elferen, 2016, p.167) quality of the ghostly sounds: “I heard a sharp metallic rap behind me and turned round. Then there came another rap on my left. A similar sound then came from behind me” (Gauld and Cornell, 1979, p.286). The process of the eerie is here gradually amplifying, and it will soon reach the point of saturation. As Penzoldt theorised, this ‘saturation’ coincides with the apparition of the supernatural event, a visual encounter which transgresses the consensual laws of the natural world. In this case, a poltergeist phenomenon: “I turned round to face the third noise and saw a teaspoon suspended in mid-air about a foot from the end of my nose” (Gauld and Cornell, 1979, p.286).

One last example, taken from the fieldwork study of folklorist David Hufford (2001), further confirms the dynamics outlined until now. The researcher interviewed the members of a family which claimed to suffer poltergeist disturbances in their new home. As Hufford points out (Hufford, 2001, p.28), footsteps sounds are among the most common phenomena occurring in these cases:

I was running my mouth and Sam was there and Richard was there, and we were the only ones in the house...And I was talking and then all of a sudden I noticed that the men were looking up like that [she demonstrates] and just kind of listening. They weren't listening to me, and I stopped talking. And I could just hear the footsteps...and it just sounded like someone was walking around up there. [...] But it was – it was so normal that it didn't sound out of the ordinary until we realized that we were the only ones in the house [...]. (Hufford, 2001, p.21)

Once again, the eeriness of the sounds is fundamentally related to the ecological dynamics of listening. The sounds heard, in fact, are initially described as “normal” and become “out of the ordinary” only when their contextual impossibility is acknowledged, thus producing a question of agency: the sounds unsettle the certainty that the members of the family *should be* the only ones in the house. What puts the eerie process in motion, therefore, is particularly related to the way sound happens in time and the relationalities that it establishes between the listener and the environment.

There is therefore an interaction at work, an ecological exchange mediated by sound and other invisible phenomena at the source of the experience of haunting, which often becomes even more impactful than the apparition itself.

This relational process in place, as well as the sonorous dynamics that seem to mediate it, are at the source of the conceptualisations that *The Stone Tape* presents in fictional form, and that are among the most important and long-lasting hypotheses on haunting produced in the last two hundred years of paranormal research. They therefore compose an important aspect of the Antenna component of *The Stone Tape*, a discursive framing of the affective sensation of haunting that the TV play will in part preproduce, in part transform to propose a particular approach to the theory of haunting. The Antenna will thus transmit, at the input of the Tuner component, an idea of haunting which is founded around ecologies of listening and embodied intensities emerging from the vibrational mechanics of a listening body acting within an acoustic space.

### **At the source of the Stone Tape Theory: psychometry and the resonant aether**

Contemporary paranormal discourse often outlines a typology of haunting phenomena divided into four main groups. These are particularly characterised by ecological dimensions of the experience, regarding the modes by which alleged supernatural agencies are seemingly interacting with the experiencer and with the shared environment. The first type of haunting is the so-called intelligent haunting: the agency of the haunting, inhabiting the place in non-physical or quasi-physical form, manifests an intentionality and a communicative behaviour, interacting with living subjects through various sensory modalities. In this case, the apparition is often postulated to be the revenant spirit of a departed which maintained a form of disembodied consciousness after the death of their material body. The second form of haunting is the poltergeist: the source of the supernatural phenomena is not a ghost but rather a psychokinetic energy involuntarily emanated by a living person, usually a teenager undergoing a troubled sexuality development. In this case, the mind of the person is said to be able, under certain circumstances, to produce physical phenomena of a mischievous, aggressive or disturbing nature. The third form of haunting is commonly referred as demonic in origin: the agency behind the phenomena is a disembodied

non-human entity, residing in other ontological planes of existence but yet capable of entering in contact with the human sensorium and the natural territory.

The last form of haunting is the so-called residual haunting: an umbrella term that gathers together numerous ideas and hypotheses, such as those presented in *The Stone Tape* of what is considered the “most common type of haunting” (Psychic Library, 2020). It is generally the most accepted hypothesis, as it does not involve the belief of the persistence of consciousness after death but instead ‘only’ postulates the presence of a still-undiscovered natural connection between the human mind and inert matter. In the case of residual haunting, in fact, the paranormal phenomena are not driven by intelligent agencies but are rather considered reverberations of past events ‘recorded’ within the very fabric of physical reality, persisting through time as forms of energetic radiations that sensitive, attuned individuals are capable of capturing and emotionally re-enacting. In this case, the haunting is non-intelligent and non-responsive, usually consisting in apparitions seemingly stuck into the endless repetition of cyclical events, most commonly strong emotional events that happened in their past life, or the scenario that immediately preceded their death.

To understand the origins of the residual haunting hypothesis it is necessary to outline the wider discourse concerning the application of the science of vibration, of oscillatory energy and resonant phenomena to the context of the paranormal. During the nineteenth century, the scientific discoveries and the technological innovations emerging from the study of vibratory and resonant processes had such a vast impact on western culture and society that some scholars even define that period as “vibratory modernism” (Enns and Trower, 2013, p.16; Darlymple Henderson, 2002, p.126). In this context, the theories on waveformed energy heavily influenced the occultural milieu as well. For instance, it is possible to find a wide use of the concept of ‘sympathetic vibration’ – fundamentally a synonym for resonance – employed as a discursive “bridge between physical and psychical research” (Enns and Trower, 2013, p.5).

However, while the nineteenth century certainly proves to be the foundational period of a resonant conceptualisation for the supernatural, strong relationships between the science of vibrations, media technologies and paranormal discourse can be traced



well beyond the vibratory modernism, throughout the twentieth century until the present day. Throughout modern history, in fact, there is a clear tendency in psychical research to represent and ultimately territorialise the notions of supernatural experience by borrowing concepts and theories pertaining to every époque's scientific episteme, such as magnetism (Crowe, 1866), electricity (Cooley, 1852), radioactivity (Barrett, 1904), radio waves (Tyrrell, 1938), gravitational force (Heath, 2005), geomagnetism (Persinger and Koren, 2001), infrasound (Tandy and Street, 2000; Parsons, 2012), ultrasound (Keel, 2002) or quantum mechanics (Sheldrake, 2012), just to name a few. The 'stone tape theory' too can be positioned within this ongoing representational attempt.

A text which is often addressed as the earliest inspiration for the stone tape theory (Hill, 2017), is the *Ninth Bridgewater Treatise* by scientist and philosopher Charles Babbage, published in 1838. In this essay on natural theology, Babbage speculates upon fringe implications of the first law of thermodynamics, the "principle of equality of action and reaction" (Babbage, 1838, p.108). For the scientist, every human action performed throughout history leaves a waveformed perturbation of the air which keeps propagating eternally, diffracting with all the other traces of every other event. This leads to a conceptualisation of physical matter as a diffused information storage medium:

Thus considered, what a strange chaos is this wide atmosphere we breathe! [...] The air itself is one vast library, on whose pages are for ever written all that man has ever said or woman whispered (Babbage, 1838, p.108)

A similar view can be found in the writings of the psychologist Fechner (1905), who also connects the physical and the psychological domains. Here, the electric signals that are produced inside the human brain are conceived as capable of generating a magnetic field which is extended beyond the brain itself. These vibrations irradiate thoughts and emotions "into infinity" (Fechner, 1905, p.60), even after the person's physical death, thus invisibly connecting every living and non-living being: "we produce, every one of us, a continual circle of actions all around us, encircling and crossing those produced by our fellow-men" (Fechner, 1906, p.20).

In the nineteenth century's cultural milieu, a vibratory conceptualisation of matter is at the basis of the theory of psychometry, a term coined in 1842 which refers to the alleged capability of certain individuals to perceive psychic energies – called “mental fossils” (Buchanan, 1893, p.73) – irradiated by objects, allowing them to retrieve information related to the objects' original owners. This mind-matter interaction is said to occur thanks to the transmission of an unspecified force (Denton and Denton, 1863, p. xliii). In psychometric texts, sound phenomena are often referred to explain such liminality between external perception and internal imagination:

*Usually, [...] these sounds are perceived rather than heard. [...] [T]here have been times when I could not, and cannot yet, tell whether they were heard by the external or only by the internal ear, so like were they in all respects to sounds produced by outward, tangible forms. (Denton and Denton, 1863, p. xliv, emphasis in the original)*

The psychometric hypothesis has inspired numerous attempts at understanding the sensations that some individuals allegedly feel in haunted places (Barrett, 1912). The astronomer and psychical researcher Flammarion developed this idea in an influential book written in 1924, whose similarities with *The Stone Tape* can be clearly traced, in particular about the use of the sound recording metaphor:

The walls and furniture may preserve the imprint of events with which they were associated, speak into a gramophone, so long as the record is preserved, the sound of your voice will be reproduced every time the gramophone is set in motion, whether you be alive or dead. (Flammarion, 1924, p.205)

The process is described by Flammarion as a “saturation of the aura” (Flammarion, 1924, p.208) of the room, occurring in cases of strong emotional outputs. The process of the haunting is traced through a conceptualisation of the sound phenomena involved, which is at once material and symbolic:

Noises are heard which differ according to the state of receptivity of the percipient. They are subjective and non-material noises. [...] Rather do we suspect a psychic current, like the magnetic current produced between a bar of iron and a magnetic needle. (Flammarion, 1924, p.298)

In his presidential address to the London Society for Psychical Research (1938), Harry Price further developed similar hypotheses. He is preoccupied as well with the mediations between the material and the mental that characterise haunting experiences, which he explains with the postulation of an undetectable psychic atmosphere:

[T]his psychic atmosphere would have some of the properties of matter (namely spatial extension and location in Physical Space) and some of the properties of mind. It would be a portion of this Psychic Ether localised in and around a certain place, the place where a living human body now is; just as a ghost is a portion of this same Psychic Ether localised in a place where a living human being formerly was. (Price, 1938, p.336, emphasis in the original)

Price's hypothesis on hauntings resonates with the conceptualisation of affective atmospheres as "emotions poured out spatially" (Schmitz, 2011, p.247), which however cannot be reduced neither to a completely objective nor subjective phenomenon (Bohme, 2016): "The psychic atmosphere surrounding the percipient is spatial in quite a literal sense. Yet it is not physical, as his nervous system is" (Price, 1938, p.336). Relevantly, Price highlights the processual nature of the interaction of this atmosphere against a fixed, objectual representation of hauntings:

How should the persistence of an image be conceived? I should suppose that it is more analogous to the persistence of a *process* (e.g. a prolonged noise) than to the persistence of a *thing*, such as a brickbat. (Price, 1938, p.319, emphasis in the original)

The process is represented as a form of resonance: in order to experience the images and the sounds of the haunting, the percipient's 'atmosphere' must be attuned to the 'wavelength' of the haunting recording stored in the physical matter. This attunement is called "rapport" (Price, 1938, p.321)<sup>4</sup>, or "telepathic affinity", which causes feelings

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<sup>4</sup> This term of French origins is attested as early as 1845 to describe the magnetic interactions in mesmeric practices and widely used by Crowe (1866) to express the necessity of an attunement between the subject and the haunting ghost, mediated by some sort of dynamic energy:

With respect to the faculty of ghost-seeing [...] it depended on several circumstances, external and internal. [...] Again, there must be a rapport. [...] There must be a particular aptitude: what it consists in, I do not know. (Crowe, 1866, p.51)

of “emotional malaise” and senses of presence (Price, 1938, p.325). In the case of a sufficient affinity, this resonance-like interaction *amplifies* the psychic atmosphere, and the haunting experience is thus triggered. If, however, “[...] the affinity is light or nonexistent, nothing will happen, even though the spatial conditions for ghost seeing are completely fulfilled. And even though the telepathic affinity is great, still nothing will happen if the intensity of the telepathic charge is too low” (Price, 1938, p.323). Once again, these discourses address to the fundamentally relational and bidirectional communication involved in the processes of haunting.

Throughout the history of psychical research it is possible to find numerous other cases of similar representations of paranormal phenomena in terms of resonance. For instance, Barrett conceives spiritualist mediums as “receivers, or resonators” (Barrett, 1904, p.198), and Sinclair states that the human mind is “just a radio receiving set, which picks up the thoughts of all the other creatures of this universe.” (Sinclair, 1930, p.227). Similar conceptualisations can be found in De La Warr’s healing practices of radionics (Day and De La Warr, 1956). More recently, a popular instance of such discourses is the work of archaeologist turned paranormal researcher T.C. Lethbridge. His books, published between the sixties and the seventies, present theorisations and hypotheses which are extremely similar to those proposed in *The Stone Tape*, and can be postulated to be a major influence in the play’s screenplay. Lethbridge differentiates between *ghosts* – which are perceptual manifestations in the form of visual and auditory phenomena – and *ghouls* – the vague senses of presence, sudden feelings of dread and horror, and ambiguous bodily temperature shifts, which are commonly reported in accounts of hauntings (Lethbridge, 1961, p.54). For Lethbridge, the magnitude and modality of the experience of haunting is a matter of attunement to the resonant frequencies of the ghoul, and the process is once again conceived as a mediation occurring thanks to a “force known as resonance, which appears to be akin to electro-magnetism” (Lethbridge, 1961, p.11). The process is almost identical to the one elaborated by the characters in *The Stone Tape*, and it is constructed by tracing the role of auditory phenomena such as footsteps:

There are very many stories of people hearing steps in the night. [...] I have little doubt that steps of this kind are a telepathic phenomenon and I just happened to be on the right wave-length to receive them. [...] Had my receiving set had a

slightly different tuning, I might have seen the tramping figure and not heard him. Or I might have felt him as a ghoul and neither seen nor heard anything. (Lethbridge, 1961, p.119)

For Lethbridge both the formation and the perception of a *ghoul* result from interactions between the dynamic psychic force-field of an individual and the static force-field of an environment. The matter composing physical spaces irradiates static electro-magnetic fields which can be modulated by the energy propagating in strong emotional events. This modulated energy is then stored in the energy field of the environment, and it could then be retrieved by sensitive individuals (Lethbridge, 1963, p.30).

The perception of the haunting is rendered into a metaphor of radio-like reception: a psyche tuned to the correct wavelength (detection) receives the modulated image of the past (decoding, demodulation) and, if the individual is sufficiently sensitive (amplification) they can then perceive images and sounds. The resonant process is at the same time material and discursive: there *must* be a form of psycho-physical resonance at work, albeit still unrevealed (Lethbridge, 1963). The resonance-based hypothesis emerges as a representation of the modalities by which the process itself seems to develop in time and space, with the production and circulation of affective atmospheres. The postulation of a form of electro-magnetic resonance is an attempt at bringing back the undefined and unexplained atmospheric sensation to a natural, scientific understanding. In other words, to territorialise it.

The overview conducted above provides a useful discursive framework for the analysis that follows, as the network of theories, hypotheses and imageries that compose the umbrella concept of residual haunting are the milieu from which *The Stone Tape* develops. In the radio methodological model, the Antenna had the function to gather a wide spectrum of influences, references and inspirations that would compose the principal field within which the eerie resonances of the eerie in *The Stone Tape* would be constructed, as will be explored in the next Tuner section. The trope of the haunted house, as well as the multiple sides of the idea of haunting as the residual energy of past psycho-physical events are in other words the discursive field within which the radio process of *The Stone Tape* is immersed into, and the material-discursive vectors which will define how the process that leads to the paranormal experience is

represented and expressed in the play. The next section will tune in to such background in order to trace how the BBC play reconstructs and formalises the aforementioned theories in a cohesive, technologically-imbued conceptualisation of the paranormal, one that has had a long influence upon paranormal research until today.

### 4.3 Tuner

The role of this Tuner will be to analyse how the components captured in the Antenna influence and direct the processes by which *The Stone Tape* represents a deterritorialisation from the everyday world to then create the conditions for the paranormal experience to happen. The purpose of this section will be to trace how the atmosphere of the eerie is constructed in the fictional representation of the TV play, and how such processes are expressed specifically from sonic and resonant positions, with particular emphasis of the ecological dynamics of listening with and within the haunted space where the story is set.

The first preoccupation of this Tuner is to understand how the world represented in the *The Stone Tape* – initially a perfectly ordinary setting, with a strong scientific and rationalist underpinning – gets gradually unsettled, with the emergence of agencies and affordances at first ambiguous, and then fully manifesting their paranormal nature, as the accounts proposed in the Antenna section. More than the actual representation of such supernatural entities themselves, the focus will primarily be on the processes, on the interactions happening between the natural and the supernatural world, on the movements and changes – happening at affective, embodied and atmospheric levels – that create the conditions for the apparition of the supernatural. To do so, the analysis will be focused on the representations and expressions of sonorous phenomena and resonant processes involved in the paranormal experience portrayed in *The Stone Tape*, with particular emphasis on the ecological interactions that acoustics mediate within the haunted chamber's walls.

As mentioned above, *The Stone Tape* will be treated as a theory-fictional work: a text which utilises the form of the fictional TV play to represent some of the archetypical processes of hauntings as well as the residual haunting hypothesis that, as the Antenna demonstrates, has a history that spans more than a hundred years before the teleplay here under investigation. *The Stone Tape* will be therefore approached in order to trace how it represents the material-discursive relationships, interactions and affective modulations that psychical research considered at the source of experiences of haunting. Although the analysis data will be gathered from narrative material, the theatrical performances of the actors experiencing and investigating the haunting provides valuable information for the influence that the BBC play had on generations of paranormal researchers and their methodologies – discussed in the Detector. This Tuner will initially analyse the first minutes of the play, from the beginning to the first apparitional event, to understand how the play represents the process that unsettles the ordinary world, gradually leading to the paranormal.

### **The path from the everyday to the supernatural**

The Antenna introduced some recurrent and relevant themes connected to contemporary accounts of hauntings. As highlighted, those alleged real-life experiences displayed peculiar sonic relationalities which had the power to unsettle an otherwise everyday context, transforming an ordinary familiar environment into the stage for strange and unexplainable events. What happens is a gradual shifting towards the potential presence of a yet invisible agency which poses the experiencers in a liminal, oscillatory territory, before collapsing it with the apparition of a rationality-defying paranormal phenomenon. A similar process is represented in the first haunting scene of *The Stone Tape*, where an archetypical spectral apparition unfolds in the haunted storage room of the Ryan Electrics' new R&D headquarter. In this sense, the scenography and the way the characters are seen theatrically interacting with and within the storyworld are particularly relevant aspects for the analysis that will be here conducted. There is, in fact, a symmetry between the unfolding of the eerie and the *mise en scene* of the characters walking into the haunted room for the first time. Here, the contrast between the everyday, rational world and the anomalous is expressed

spatially, through the representation of the two main spaces where the events unfold: respectively, the laboratory and the haunted storage room itself.

At the very beginning, the characters enter their new laboratory for the first time. The atmosphere is light-hearted and cheerful, they are all very excited. Brock is giving a motivational speech to his colleagues, promising great scientific (and economic) developments ahead. As mentioned, the abandoned and derelict Victorian building has been completely renovated and modernised, transforming the ruined rooms into functional and efficient spaces, ready to host the cutting-edge scientific research of the team. Unfortunately, this ordering is but a fragile attempt, and far from stable. In fact, its stability is undermined the very moment the storage room is firstly mentioned. While Brock is enumerating the different facilities, the programmer Jill asks him about the data storage devices, necessary for her digital calculations: we learn that they are meant to be placed in the storage room. However, the renovating works, completed everywhere else in the building, have not even started in the storage room yet:

BROCK: Colly. Computer storage room. When do we get it?

COLLINSON: Oh yes. Well —

BROCK: What?

COLLINSON (embarrassed): There've been — problems.

BROCK (quietly): You were here to solve them. (Controlling his anger) How far have they got with it? Colly, how much have they done?

COLLINSON (bluntly): Nothing. (Kneale, 1972)

Before receiving any information about the history and the nature of such place, the very moment we learn about the room's existence we also understand its *problematic* existence. The sole mentioning of the room drastically changes the overall atmosphere of the scene. "Let me see!" Brock shouts, quickly exiting the lab. Collinson and Jill follow him, and we see the three walking the path that connects the laboratory to the storage room. Once inside, Brock sees with his own eyes the ruined state in which the room has been left. He is furious, as this inconvenience could undermine the whole production agenda of the team. Brock starts an argument with Collinson, who explains that the workers refused to work on the room due to mysterious 'problems' that they allegedly encountered. The two then quickly exit the scene, to interrogate the workers responsible for the delays. Jill is left alone in the room. We hear the footsteps of the



two men fading in the distance, reverberating between the room's walls. Suddenly, Jill grasps her arms around her chest, trembling:

Jill shivers. It is cold here, the chill suddenly striking. (Kneale, 1972)

The shiver, a sensation which recurs throughout the film, marks the beginning of the haunting scene. It is a vague, undefined feeling which will be described later in the script as “premonitory chills” (Kneale, 1972). We still hear the echoing footsteps, but this time Jill turns around frantically, as trying to locate their source in the room:

As the men's footsteps fade they seem to echo inside the room. Curiously changed, though — this is a rapid pattering.  
The effect is so startling that Jill spins round expecting to see another person.  
And finds nobody. (Kneale, 1972)

The phenomena are surely mysterious, but Kneale still withholds any open reference to the supernatural. What Kneale is representing here is a fictional rendition of the same fundamental phases observed in the Antenna, during the analysing of some typical accounts of haunting phenomena in the paranormal literature. It is in fact possible to trace the same progression from subtle feelings of presence to auditory phenomena which trigger particular ecological relationships between the listener and their surrounding environment. The men's footsteps *seem to* echo inside the room: they could still be an acoustic illusion, provoked by the highly reverberant character of the place, although they are curiously changed. Kneale keeps playing with peripheral sensations and ambiguous perceptions:

She forces calm on herself and makes for the door. As she reaches it the sense of another presence behind her is overwhelming. (Kneale, 1972)

In their temporal development, the different phenomena that the scene depicts gradually amplify the *potentiality* of an invisible entity in the room. Kneale places the character Jill – as well as the viewers – in a liminal condition, a constant questioning on the nature of the *agency* that is producing the auditory phenomena. This question is precisely the source of the sensation of the eerie in Fisher's theory (2017): a “failure” (61) of a clear separation between presence and absence. On one side, in fact, we

hear the characters' footsteps even if they should have already faded in the distance – a “failure of absence” (ibid.). On the other, the sound of footsteps so clearly localised in the room should be produced by a well-visible source that, however, fails to emerge as present. However, the eerie is a transitory movement and its question is soon answered when the agency actually *appears*, visually, and fully objective:

She halts and steadies herself against the doorpost. Quite deliberately, she turns to look.

And sees a figure.

It is standing high up on the peg-like steps. The figure of a woman in black, its face hidden by arms raised in front of it. It looks as if it is on the point of falling. Still and rigid. (Kneale, 1972)

Looking at the play's script, it is interesting to note how Kneale typographically expresses the climax of the apparition, by separating the sentences with empty lines, to dramatically remark the importance of the phrase “and sees a figure”: the visual appearance is a rupture, an irruption that cuts the gradual process so far in development and that is expressed in the text itself with an otherwise unnecessary separation. This jump operates a fundamental ontological shift, and what was before implied by vague and ambiguous potentialities is now confronted as the *actuality* of the paranormal. The apparition dissipates in an instant, marked by a new, horrific sonic event:

In the same moment that the vision lasts — and it is only a moment — there is a shrill rasp in the air. A human scream that has lost its humanity, denatured and dead. (Kneale, 1972)

However, the nature of this sound is different, with respect to the preceding auditory events. While the footsteps sounds were conceived as ordinary and natural, this scream is described as denatured, deprived of its humanity: a fundamental transgression. After the shrill has faded away in the room's reverb, the haunting event ends. Jill is once again alone in the middle of the silent, bare storage room. The apparition is gone, everything seems to be back to normal. But something has drastically changed: in the possible world of *The Stone Tape*, the supernatural *is now*

*present*. The supernatural disappeared from the screen and from Jill's immediate sensorium, but indeed remains as a residual presence, an echo within the protagonist's world. The visual apparition of the ghost provoked a fundamental shift: from the ambiguous question of the eerie, to the irruption a *wrong* presence. In Fisher's terms, the irruption of the *weird*:

a weird entity or object is so strange that it makes us feel that it should not exist, or at least it should not exist here. Yet if the entity or object is here, then the categories which we have up until now used to make sense of the world cannot be valid. (Fisher, 2017, p.15)

Kneale constructs the apparitional scene as a process in which the events happening in the room progressively set the conditions for the emergence of the weird. Penzoldt's classic study on supernatural fiction defines the archetypical ghost story as an "ascending line" which, thanks to a "cleverly created atmosphere", leads to the culminating climax, which is "obviously the appearance of the spectre" (Penzoldt, 1952, p.16):

Most writers try to achieve a certain gradation, by hinting, first vaguely, and then more and more directly, at the climax. For example, in a typical ghost story there is first some occurrence that indicates the presence of a ghost, then the spectre appears but is not recognised as such; finally the presence of the supernatural can no longer be denied (Penzoldt, 1952, p.23)

Todorov expands this notion of a progressive distancing from a 'natural' world by conceiving the fantastic as the momentary hesitation – shared by both the reader and the character – between natural and supernatural explanations of the experienced events (Todorov, 1973, p.26). Jill, while standing still at the door of the storage room, is *at the threshold* of this moment of uncertainty: she could either keep walking out of the door, and avoid the visual confrontation with the ghost, or turn around and therefore see the apparition, thus acknowledging the presence of the supernatural. Fisher (2017) describes how the sensation of the eerie is a transitory condition that dissipates as soon as the question of agency is answered by a natural, rational explanation. What I argue here, is that the eerie is equally dissolved also in the case of a super-natural answer.

In other words, the sensation of the eerie is not a stable condition but rather the vector, the very movement – here understood in a material, discursive and narrative sense at once – which leads to the forking path leading to the natural, everyday world on one side and to a world where the paranormal exists, on the other. Although the spatial metaphor here adopted seems to imply it, these two sides are not to be considered as opposed, mutually exclusive ontologies. On the contrary – and this will be one of the central themes of the entire research – everyday and paranormal worlds are considered as woven into each other and in a relationship of mutual resonance, rather than linear opposition. The sensation of the eerie, in this sense, is the process that makes the play oscillate between these two poles: events, geographies and characters' actions compose the apparatus which continually reformulates the boundaries of the natural and the supernatural world and the “agential cut[s]” (Barad, 2007, p.131) that effectively construct the idea of the ghost and its onto-epistemological separations from the human territory.

This concept, which will be developed throughout the chapter and the whole research, distances my approach to that of Penzoldt (1952) and Todorov (1975). In fact, the ‘forking path’ here metaphorised is not fixed and objective, but rather exists as an oscillatory space emerging between two resonating poles: a tuning fork. A natural and a supernatural understanding of the world remain virtual, in potential, as abstractions influencing a reality which always sees the two territories as coexisting and resonating together. This is made clear by the modes with which the *The Stone Tape* prepares for and introduces the supernatural element. These modes are essentially focused on the spatial dimension of the portrayed events. As mentioned, the whole story is centred around the storage room, a place which is more than ‘just’ a haunted room: more than, in the most simplistic way possible, a room with a ghost dwelling in it. Instead, the storage room *is* the supernatural phenomenon in *The Stone Tape*: it is a territory which is different from the ordinary, human one, and manifests its alterity through sonic (footsteps, the scream) visual (the apparition) and haptic (the shivering) phenomenologies. But even more importantly, the crucial dynamic of the supernatural in the TV play emerge from the resonant dialectics between the different spaces – at once symbolic and material – that are represented during the scenes that prepare for the first haunting apparition.

The storage room is an anomalous place. Its difference from the rest of the building, and the laboratory in particular, is expressed by a play of contrasts involving a dialogue between visual, auditory and narrative dynamics. For instance, while the laboratory is newly renovated, the storage room is still a ruin. The laboratory is clean and illuminated; the storage room is dark and dirty. The laboratory is filled with people, machines and furniture; the storage room is empty, unless for some out-of-context objects: a table, a staircase that leads to nowhere, thirty cans of SPAM from the Second World War, an old letter to Father Christmas. The laboratory is noisy, filled with sounds produced by the scientists and by their machines; the storage room is silent. Most importantly, the laboratory is ordered, functional and purposeful; the storage room is functionless, useless, chaotic.

However, the difference between these two places is not represented as a dualist opposition. Instead, Sasdy and Kneale once again draw from lived paranormal experiences in the literature of psychical research, in which the haunting is often embedded within everyday ecological relationalities. Here, the two rooms act as the attraction poles placed at the extremes of a continuum, in which the atmosphere of the play seamlessly oscillates back and forth. The unsettlement of the everyday context of the laboratory is achieved by making the viewers follow the characters walking the whole path from the laboratory, through a corridor, to the big wooden door of the storage room and finally inside the room itself. This transitional scene, which seems to be nothing more than a mere filmic connective device, has instead a crucial role in the onboarding of the supernatural event. The anomalous aura of the storage room emerges from the movement of the characters, while the ordinary, human setting of the laboratory is dynamically and progressively unsettled. In this way, the absolute alterity of the storage room is never openly expressed before the first apparition, but instead suggested as emerging from the spatial movement itself.

When the characters eventually reach the storage room, then, we viewers do not yet expect to find the supernatural, but we rather *question* the agencies potentially related to the room: what prevented the storage room from being renovated? Who originally inhabited it? What was its function? And, most of all, what *can* happen in such a place? The eerie question of agency emerging from such oscillation between physical spaces is at the heart of the Tuner component of *The Stone Tape*. In particular, it will be the

very movement between such spaces, and the affective intensities produced by the different ecologies of listening, to become the driving force of the potentiality of the paranormal in the place, as discussed below.

### **A dramaturgy of reverbs**

As described above, the gradual transformation of the atmosphere that occurs between the laboratory and the storage room prepares the viewers for the potentiality that anomalous events could happen in the latter locale. Nevertheless, prior to the emergence of the first haunting nothing has yet hinted at the possibility that this anomaly could be of supernatural origin. However, if the whole process is analysed from the point of view of the acoustic dynamics that unfold in the path the characters walk, this neat cut disappears, and the supernatural event can be recontextualised as the culminating point of a continuum which seamlessly connects the everyday world of the laboratory to the anomalous environment of the storage room.

From a sound design point of view, each room shown in the TV play has a specific sonic characterisation. The peculiar acoustic quality of each place makes itself heard whenever a sonic event happens within them: the characters' actions such as walking, moving objects and talking all produce sounds which excite the specific reverberant behaviour of each room. This assumes a fundamental relevance when it is reminded that *The Stone Tape* is produced as a television theatrical play, where postproduction is almost absent and the shooting captures the entirety of the acting and the real-world scenography. What is heard is therefore a live recorded sound, capturing the on-site natural acoustics. The reverberation that affects the events and voices in the different rooms is thus a physical effect of the actors' performance, and an integral part of the play's dramaturgy which director Sasdy necessarily took into account during the design of the production. This further tightens the connections between the history of accounts on hauntings and the representational project of *The Stone Tape*, which purposefully brings the acoustic dimension to the foreground, in order to clearly state its role in such experiences.

Each sound event happening throughout the play excites the different rooms' acoustics in unique ways, expanding the original sound beyond its occurring in time

and space. Each room, therefore gets briefly inhabited by residual vibrations of a sound already dissipated, giving information about the room where it is resonating – and re-sounding. Thanks to the video editing of the scene in which the characters reach the storage room, the different ways the sounds are propagated in the different spaces articulate an expressive dramaturgy of the reverberant dynamics represented. More specifically, what is staged is a progressive growth of the amount of reverb of the spaces, from the driest one – the laboratory – to the most reverberant one – the storage room. As mentioned above, the reverb of the storage room plays an important role in the phenomenology of the apparition. In the script, the ghostly phenomena almost seem to emerge from the physical reverb produced by the characters' footsteps, creating a condition of ambiguity and perceptual confusion which initially make the ghostly sounds mistakeable for a mere acoustic illusion. Jill first hears the two men's fading footsteps, which then *seem to* echo from inside the room, and from this echoing sound the ghostly footsteps emerge. Therefore, in the teleplay, the movement from the driest to the wettest room becomes a process of gradual approaching of the most suitable environment for the emergence of the apparition.

The laboratory, the first room we encounter, is almost dried out of any reverberation (fig.2). When Brock, Collinson and Jill exit the laboratory, they reach a long corridor, a more reverberant space in which their footsteps echo (fig.3). At the end of the corridor lies the big wooden door of the storage room, in front of which Brock briefly hesitates, before opening it. Here, the film actually makes us hear the reverb of the storage room even before seeing its interiors. When Brock firmly opens the door, his action breaks the silence of the scene by producing a loud, clanking noise which is immediately extended by a vast reverb coming from inside the room. It is one of the loudest sounds occurred so far, and it triggers the widest reverb (fig.4), which announces the architectural dimensions of the huge room that we are about to see.

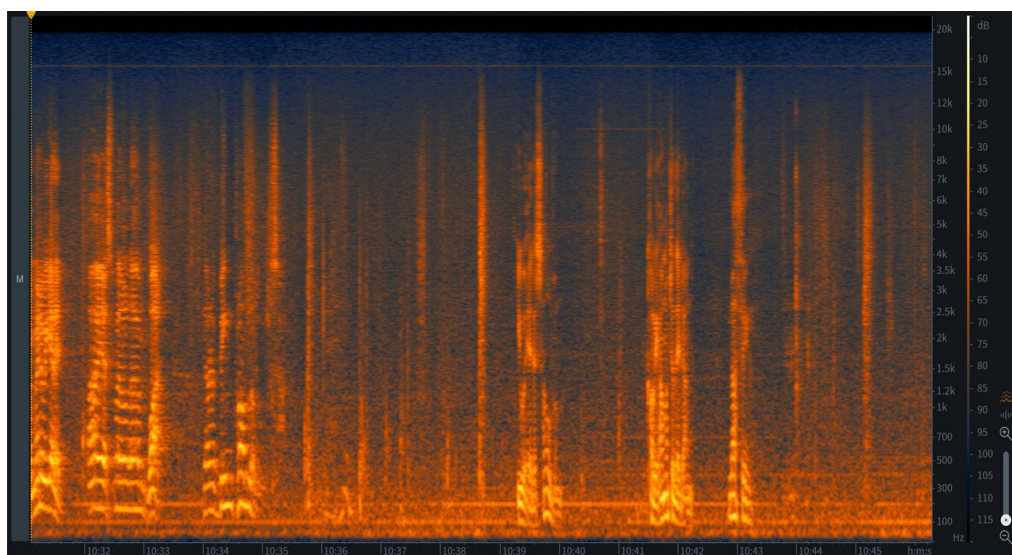


Figure 2 – Dry noises and voices in the laboratory

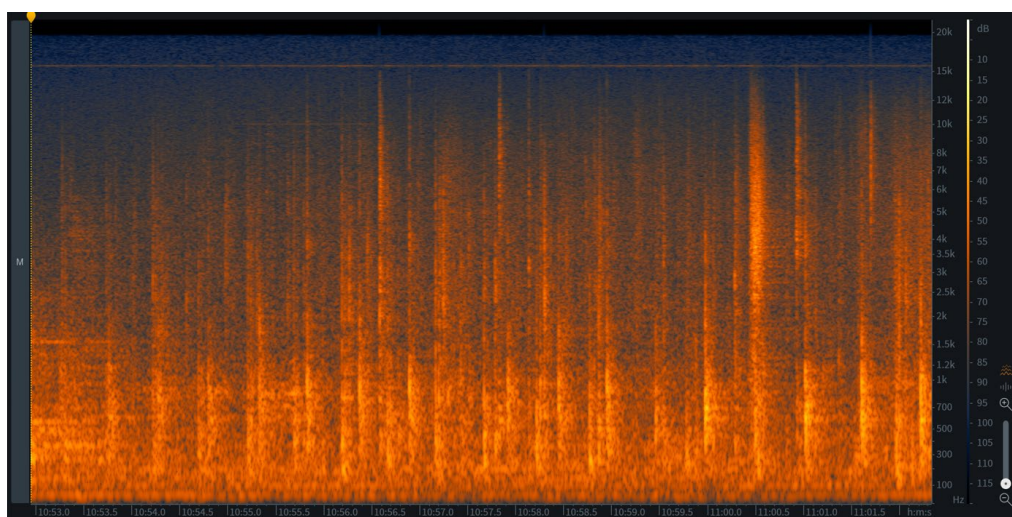


Figure 3 – Reverberated footsteps in the corridor

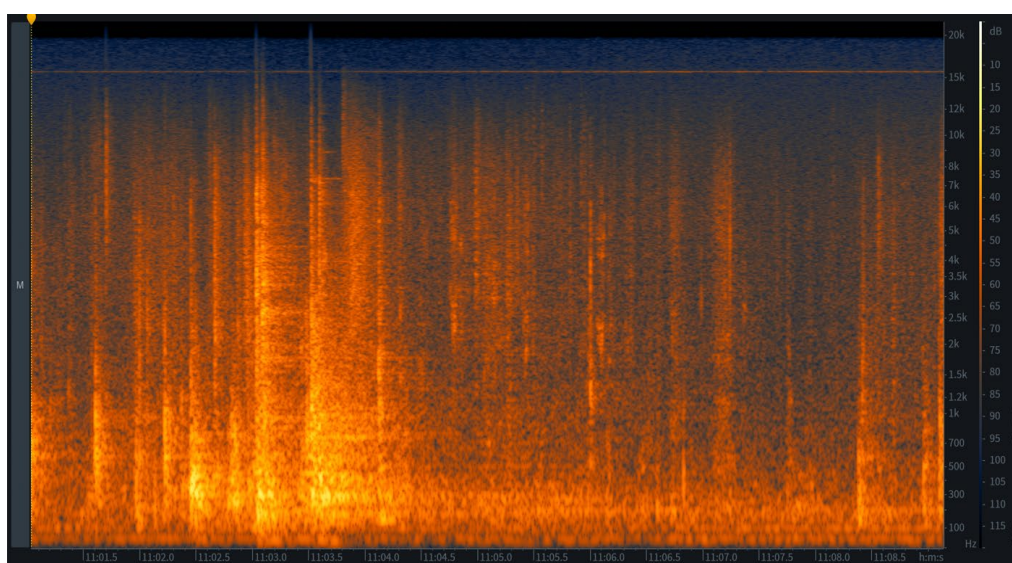


Figure 4 – long reverberation of the storage room's door opening



Only *after* this event does the camera move through the open door, showing the room to the viewers for the first time. The characters then walk inside:

Brock stands in the middle of the room, unable to believe it.

BROCK: It — it simply isn't — !Five months and not a single— ! (Kneale, 1972)

Brock speaks loudly and with a voice choked in anger: his fragmented utterances, filled with sudden stops, allow for a full appreciation of the reverberating effect. It almost seems that every action that Brock performs inside the room functions as trigger for the *impulse response* of the room, thus making the viewers aware of its reverb: this is evident when Brock smashes and tears apart the wooden panels hiding the stairwell where the ghost would later appear (fig.5). When we hear the ghostly footsteps, then, we – and Jill – are already acquainted with the reverberant quality of the room, thus perhaps more inclined to initially interpret the ambiguous sound phenomena as natural effects.

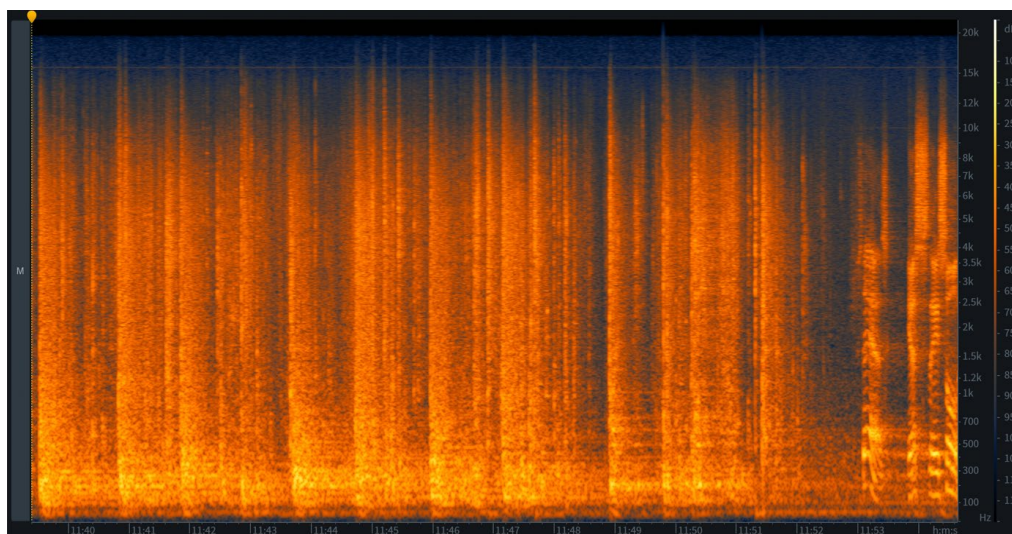


Figure 5 – reverberated noises produced by Brock smashing wooden panels

Vast reverbs and echoes are a common trope in gothic and horror fiction (Foley, 2018, p.459; Edwards, 2015, p.59). The fictional representation of acoustics directly interacts with the viewer's own experiential background of the emotional effects which reverberant spaces are able to produce. Reverb can bring an "often involuntary revival of memory caused by listening and the evocative power of sounds" (Augoyard and Torgue, 2006, p.21), emotional responses that are of "a personal or collective nature"

(Augoyard and Torgue, 2006, p.23). Reverb is tightly connected to the experience of the numinous atmosphere (Griffero, 2016, p.73) that places such as cathedrals (Jasen, 2016, p.108) or caves (Yioutsos, 2019) can manifest. Moreover, a close relation between reverb and emotional states of fear and distress can be traced. For Augoyard and Torgue, in fact, reverb can produce the effect of *ubiquity*, in which “the sound seems to come from everywhere and from nowhere at the same time”, paving the way for a “metaphysical dimension of sound” (Augoyard and Torgue, 2006, p.130). This invests the sound event with an agency which is almost intentional, capable of bringing “discomfort and anxiety” (Augoyard and Torgue, 2006, p.137):

The relentless attempt to locate a sound while being powerless in the absence of possible feedback may in fact easily result in the perception of a harmful and voluntary intentionality of the sound, directed towards oneself. (Augoyard and Torgue, 2006, p.137)

Therefore, the acoustic dimension of the environment actively contributes to that sensation of presence that so often emerges in the early stages of the accounts of hauntings, as an ambiguous, everchanging and constantly questioned feeling. Sound thus never becomes a fixed presence, but rather a continuous “coming and a passing, an extending and a penetrating” (Nancy, 2009, p.17) that fundamentally unsettles the sensorium of the listening subject and their very presence as an entity that is often considered as erroneously separated from the acoustic surrounding space.

The importance of the reverb is openly mentioned in the play when, in a later scene, the characters begin to investigate the storage room. In fact, the first peculiar aspect they notice and they aim to study is precisely the acoustics:

EDDIE: There’s a big echo in here. We ought to measure it. Something to make a loud noise with? (Kneale, 1972)

The first analysis they conduct is therefore the measurement of the impulse response of the room:

Eddie has improvised a clapper board out of two pieces of batten from a packing case. He smacks them sharply together. The percussion echoes through the room. (Kneale, 1972)

This abrupt and loud sonic event seems to have a distressing effect on the sensitive Jill, who screams just before another ghostly apparition emerges, as if triggered by the clapping noise itself. This scene further solidifies the relationship between reverb and apparitional phenomena, creating a tight temporal connection not only between natural sounds and hauntings, but also between acoustic energy and an emotional effect on the characters.

I have previously defined the articulation of the different acoustic qualities of the spaces a 'dramaturgy': the reverb, a physical consequence of the dimensions, proportions and the materials that compose the rooms is treated not as an inert effect, but instead an *actor* which actively interacts with the characters, at the same time being triggered by and influencing their actions. In the literature review chapter I have highlighted how the recursive relationalities that sound mediates (Di Scipio, 2015; Voegelin, 2014) blur the ontological separations between listening subject and listened environment, making space an active agency (Nancy, 2009) in a field of affective intensities. The reverb does not only dynamically react to every action performed in the space, it also influences the characters' actions. The storage room's reverb becomes an actor as it makes Jill *do different things* (Latour, 2006), pushing her to inhabit the storage room in a different way: she is forced to rely on her hearing rather than her sight, she has a different attentiveness to the surroundings and the peripheralities of her perception, she turns around to invisible events, she runs away, she stops; she has different feelings, different emotions, she is terrified by the reverb. The reverb is a non-human actor whose agency is actively interacting with the humans, concatenating agencies with them. It even becomes a non-natural actor, seamlessly morphing from a natural phenomenon to a supernatural one.

The highly reverberant character of the storage room narratively expresses with careful precision how acoustics have been often described as able to produce unanswered questions of agency, bringing forward the sensation of the eerie. This happens through a modulation of the spectral morphology of the sound events due to

the amplifications and dampening of the different frequencies determined by the room's resonant modes. The room's reverb blurs the contours of visual-objectual representations of space:

Sounds are like ghosts. They slink around the visual object, moving in on it from all directions, forming its contours and content in a formless breeze. The spectre of sound unsettles the idea of visual stability and involves us as listeners in the production of an invisible world. (Voegelin, 2010, p.12)

And even in the fictional setting of *The Stone Tape*, an invisible world is vitalised through sonic relationalities (Voegelin, 2014, p.162) which, however, do not produce clearly identifiable entities but potential agencies which force the minds of the characters (and of the viewers with them) to question the presence and the nature of the source of such ambiguously perceived events: did the footsteps come from inside or outside the room? Were they actually produced by the two colleagues' walking away? The attunement carried out by the Tuner component of the Radio Sorcery model in *The Stone Tape* is therefore one of engagement with the aliveness of the place, its physical but invisible and transitory agencies in the form of sonic and vibratory intensities.

Closely related to the reverberant dynamics discussed so far, a more general sonic character of the different rooms also contributes to the expression of the contrast between the ordinary world of the laboratory and the supernatural world of the storage room. Every laboratory scene, in fact, is characterised by a background noise produced by the machines, the computers and by the mechanical actions performed by the scientists upon their technological equipment. It is a sonorous layer which constantly backdrops the characters' dialogues, contributing to the setting of the laboratory as an ordinary, 'human' place, whose sonic character expresses the way the humans inhabit it and interact with it. It is also a science (fiction) space, a technologically-dominated space which from its sound character alone manifests the human intentions to research, explain, control and exploit natural and super-natural processes. These background noises are what Schafer defines as *keynote sounds*: sounds "which are heard by a particular society continuously or frequently enough to form a background against which other sounds are perceived" (Schafer, 1993, p.272).

Keynote sounds, albeit often unnoticed, contribute to the characterisation of the environment in which they propagate as they “help to outline the character of men (sic) living among them” (Schafer, 1993, p.9). They connote the laboratory as a space defined by the functional needs of the scientists at Ryan Electrics. By renovating the abandoned mansion, the characters have exerted their ordering power upon a functionless abandoned place, making it a fully equipped and functional laboratory, with furniture and machines. Such renovations have transformed the organisation and the morphology of the space (Augoyard and Torgue, 2006, p.8), altering its proportions and dimensions. New objects, new materials, new shapes have been introduced, dampening out the natural resonances of the room, drying its original reverb.

In such a functional space, sound is but a byproduct of the ordering agency of Ryan Electrics. What matters in the laboratory is what can be seen, the objects that define and express clear affordances, the possibilities of actions and interactions with the space and within the space. The laboratory is therefore a visual space and a visually defined space. Conversely, the storage room is empty, and silent. McLuhan states that in visual spaces “it is the objects that compel our attention and orient our behaviour; space becomes merely that which must be traversed in getting to or from them. [...] Without them you have empty space” (McLuhan, 1960, p.67). The concept of empty space is therefore a fundamentally visual-centred concept, a consequence of the spatial affordances that the material objects visually provide: “in our workaday world, space is conceived in terms of that which separates visible objects. “Empty space” suggests a field in which there is nothing to see” (McLuhan, 1960, p.67).

The storage room *should* be filled with human objects – the computer storage room devices – and human sounds – the buzzes and hums produced by the machines – but this failed to happen. There is no human keynote sound to give us a hint of what the function of the room is and what can be done inside the room. Therefore, by moving through different spaces, the scene marks a deterritorialisation of the social world of the laboratory: from a place “in which authors are recognizable and leave sound marks that contribute to the identity of a location” to an “anonymous sound milieu – [...] a place in which sounds are not assigned to a specific author” (Augoyard and Torgue, 2006, p.35). In this process, “the role of timbres, propagation, and notably

reverberation then acquire all their importance” (Augoyard and Torgue, 2006, p.35). This acoustic quality generates spatial affordances which are fundamentally different from those found in any other room of the mansion.

The silence that pervades the storage room expresses how the room has *resisted* the human agencies and their ordering attempts. However, while empty, the storage room is far from being still and inert. The bare space of the room allows for a full manifestation of the storage room’s *own* agencies, made of resonances, reverbs and echoes which have not been dampened by the scientists’ objects and machines. Acoustic space is not a “pictorial space, boxed in, but dynamic, always in flux, creating its own dimensions moment by moment. It has no fixed boundaries” (McLuhan, 1960, p.67). This becoming, however, remains in potential until something sonorous *happens* inside the storage room: an event which breaks the silence by upsetting the air pressure’s equilibrium inside the room.

Only in that case, then, the room actively reacts, vibrating with a non-human aliveness that is not found anywhere else in the building. The initial, silent condition of the storage room was not a condition of emptiness, a void, but instead a potential energy: the volume of air medium was still, immobile until a vibratory event put it in sonic oscillation. In the storage room, human action and performance is not directed towards an interaction with objects. It is instead a continuous ‘affect and be affected’ in a sonic space which Pieterse compares to the multichannel setups in electroacoustic music compositions:

space and sound become interlinked in a ritual sense. The space becomes organised solely with respect to the production of sound and the experience of that sound in the process becoming abstracted away from how that space exists in reality. (Pieterse, 2018, p.275)

Through sonic interactions, therefore, the space is reconfigured as a ritual space, creating a point of contact with different and transitory agencies independent from human intervention and control. It is an aliveness which unsettles the characters’ expectations of what *could* potentially happen in the place, producing confusion, illusion, distress. Before anything happens inside the room, though, such agencies

remain unrevealed, potential and *virtual*. A virtuality made of resonances, a potential energy in which not only non-human agencies but even non-natural ones lurk, waiting to be released as reverb events:

If a ghost is something waiting to happen, then it might well be something existing in the virtual, a source of energies and possibilities. (Holloway and Kneale, 2008, p.300)

In other words, while the laboratory is defined by *possible* actions, the storage room is defined by *potential* agencies:

[The] possibilities delineate a region of nominally defining - that is, normative-variation. Potential is unprescribed. It only feeds forward, unfolding toward the registering of an event [...]. Possibility is a variation implicit in what a thing can be said to be when it is on target. Potential is the immanence of a thing to its still indeterminate variation, under way (Massumi, 2002, p.9)

The laboratory is the realm of the visually-centred possible, the storage room is the realm of the auditory-based potential. In the laboratory, it is possible to see what kind of human-ordered relationships can be established with the place. In the storage room, non-human materialities define invisible interactions made of reverbs and resonant modes, so unpredictable and unexpectable that they could even allow, as seen, for the emergence of supernatural agencies.

The storage room seems therefore to exert an autonomous agency, expressed through its reverberant behaviour. As outlined above, the reverberant character of the room is a direct consequence of the material assemblage of the room itself: the room's size and proportions, the materials of which the walls are made, the spatial disposition of the objects within it. These are all reminiscences of the room constructors' architectural choices, which, as Collinson states, can be traced back to the Saxon era, therefore fundamentally dislocated in time from the rest of the building. In other words, the reverb that affects the characters' sounding actions – in such an unsettling and uncanny way – is a consequence of the ordering agencies of the original constructors of the room. It is itself a reverberation in present times of what remains of the original function of the room, a trace of long-gone ways of inhabiting and use. The agencies

of the original inhabitants, who disappeared thousands of years ago, still affect the present of the storage room, by affecting the characters' actions, modulating the sounds they produce with acoustic phenomena that are perceived by the characters as extraneous and anomalous. The room, therefore, not only resists any attempt at renovating, but also constantly reminds of its different history. There is therefore an *hauntological* dimension in the reverb of the storage room, about the way it expresses an agency of the no longer (Fisher, 2012), "that which is (in actuality is) no longer, but which is still effective as a virtuality (the traumatic "compulsion to repeat," a structure that repeats, a fatal pattern)" (Fisher, 2012, p.19) which still affects the present of the place and the presence of the humans within it.

This hauntology of reverberation *resonates* with the conceptualisation of haunting that the film introduces, the 'stone tape'. The walls' stones reflect the sonic waves produced in the present but modulating them according to geometries and materialities from the past. At the same time, the stones keep irradiating in the present the *psychical* echoes and images of long-gone tragic events. To conclude, by tracing the reverberant and the resonant of the film's different spaces, we realise that the storage room is not only the place where a ghost is more likely to appear, but that it is the *only* place where a haunting like the one depicted in *The Stone Tape* – made of both physical and psychical echoes feeding back into each other – could happen.

To summarise, the Tuner section identified the process of the eerie as emerging from physical interaction with and within the vibratory agencies inhabiting different spaces. In particular, the acoustic dynamics of particularly reverberant spaces have been recognised as particularly involved in the question of agency of the eerie as an affective bridge between the everyday, material world and the supernatural. Moreover, reverb is able to render manifest a hauntological connection between the present and the historical dimension of place, re-enacting and expressing past stories, functions and events from an embodied and affective perspective. From the Antenna to the Tuner, a continuous movement of attunement to the felt elements of place is therefore the principal condition for the emergence of the experience of the paranormal in the context, spontaneous accounts of haunting such as the one represented in *The Stone Tape*.



## 4.4 Detector

The aim of the sonic analysis conducted so far is to take advantage of the ways in which the teleplay accurately represents the development of the sensation of the eerie, conceived as a gradual shifting of, at the same time, physical spaces and semiotic territories. Similarly found in the main literature on haunting accounts, this process is constructive of particular affective atmospheres, whose very modulation and amplification allows for the emergence of the paranormal experience in *The Stone Tape*. The process, it has been seen, strongly resembles the typical processes of hauntings explored in the Antenna section: starting with subtle and ambiguous feelings, acoustic phenomena that mediate ecological interactions with the place, to arrive eventually at the irruption of the weird, the apparition. *The Stone Tape*, however, not only represents effectively the common development of haunting phenomena as found in the literature, but it describes in depth how such ambiguous experiences are studied, researched and explained by a group of scientists through the construction of hypotheses, the search for experimental evidence and subsequently the production of a theory.

This Detector section thus asks the questions of what it is possible to do with a paranormal experience, what forms of action and interaction are possible within a haunted space. These are all preoccupations that *The Stone Tape* once again draws from the field of paranormal research, and this section particularly focuses on how the teleplay's performative representations have been later adopted by successive generations of psychical researchers. In other words, the Detector explores the forms of territorialisations of the paranormal experience and the spatial affordances of haunting, by following the characters in *The Stone Tape* in their interpreting the haunting, building hypotheses and theorising on it, experimenting in it and trying to exploit its properties. It is therefore a territorialisation through making sense of the affective intensities passed by the Tuner: acoustics, ecological interactions through sound, sonic agencies.

The Detector will here investigate these sense-making processes, demonstrating how the fictional theorisations operated by the characters diegetically become a cohesive representation of the residual haunting hypothesis whose history has been outlined in the Antenna. Moreover, relatively to the radiophonic model: the study will analyse how the affective, atmospheric experience of the paranormal is decoded, brought into semiotic domain, how is it reterritorialised within rational, deterministic frameworks and with which consequences. Subsequently, the detector will trace the processes through which *The Stone Tape*, from being a mere television play, progressively became actively referred to and utilised almost as a theoretical text by paranormal investigators until present day.

### **The fictional construction of theory**

After the first supernatural event, the characters find themselves dealing with a completely deterritorialised space, a chaotic field of unknown interactions and agencies which escapes any ordering attempt. The characters of *The Stone Tape* are scientists<sup>5</sup>, and it is through a para-scientific approach that they try to make sense of the phenomena they are witnessing, in order to understand the nature of the haunting and the possible processes behind the apparitions. They are trying to reterritorialise the haunting within the boundaries of physical reality, by framing phenomena which defy natural and causal explanations within a set of measurable variables articulated in recognisable patterns. The first turning point in this sense occurs when the characters realise that everyone experiences the haunting differently. In fact, it seems impossible to find a consensus on the type, the magnitude and the position in space of the phenomena:

STEW: what did you hear?

EDDIE: It was over there! I'm not crazy!

MAUDSLEY: You could hardly hear it.

EDDIE: It was deafening!

BROCK: It wasn't loud.

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<sup>5</sup> The audio commentary of the film, Kneale explains how he took inspiration to write the characters from on-site observations of real computer science laboratories (Kneale and Newman, 2019).

EDDIE: Not loud? I heard it!  
BROCK: Just close.  
HARGRAVES: Hi, That's right.  
BROCK: No perspective on it.  
STEW (to Maudsley): What did you hear?  
MAUDSLEY (shrugging): not much.  
STEW: I didn't hear anything.  
JILL: I saw her. Again. (Kneale, 1972)

This discovery drastically changes their understanding of the phenomenon. In order to find a pattern in these chaotic experiential inconsistencies, the strength of everyone's perception becomes a *variable* to be tested in further investigations:

JILL: There are some [variables] we have missed.  
BROCK: Such as?  
JILL: The strength of people's reactions.  
BROCK: To it?  
JILL: everybody's different. One hears hardly at all. Why?  
BROCK: It's what you'd expect. Strength of eyesight or hearing.  
JILL: what about Stew?  
STEW: I still don't get a thing.  
BROCK; Okay, you're ghostproof. Like colourblind. (Kneale, 1972)

The representation they begin to construct seems paradoxical. On one hand, the fact that multiple subjects experience the haunting corroborates the objective existence of the ghost. On the other, the variability of the subjective experience hints at a fundamentally psychological nature of the phenomena. What seems to be at work is not a mere unidirectional mediation between an external event and a subject-percipient but, rather, a two-way process in which the experiencer has an active and productive role in the very emergence of the haunting. This diegetic theorisation directly reconnects to Lethbridge's theory of haunting experiences as a two-way resonance between experiencer and environment, one that is responsible not only for the very manifestation of the supernatural but also for the case-by-case phenomenology registered by individuals in their own different ways:

I have little doubt that [these spectral sounds] are a telepathic phenomenon and I just happened to be on the right wave-length to receive them. [...] Had my receiving set had a slightly different tuning, I might have seen the tramping figure

and not heard him. Or I might have felt him as a ghoul and neither seen nor heard anything. (Lethbridge, 1961, p.119)

In this section of *The Stone Tape* is therefore possible to see the process of the Detector in action, through which a theory of haunting will be produced as founded on a metaphorical conceptualisation of sonic dynamics and radio communication. The hypothesis that Jill begins to formulate involves an apparition that, although ontologically present, *exists* only in the function of a perceiving agent in the place. Stew, one of the other employees, seems to be the only one unable to see and hear the ghost. From a scientific point of view he is therefore an extremely interesting case, the living confutation of a traditional understanding of the ghost. His inability to perceive the ghostly phenomena is the demonstration that the apparition exists only as a relationship, only when the senses – and the psyche – of the experiencers and a form of ghostly emanation present in the space are *attuned* to each other:

JILL: Suppose...Stew was your only witness. In that case, would [the ghost]...walk? D'you see what I mean? Would – she – walk – for – him?  
(Kneale, 1972)

Moreover, the physical presence in the room of a perceiving subject does not seem a sufficient condition to trigger the phenomenon. Some other condition must be fulfilled for the supernatural agency to emerge and to make itself perceivable. Moreover, this condition seems to be fundamentally connected with a mysterious interaction happening with the physical space itself:

BROCK: It's the room.  
EDDIE: what?  
BROCK: it's the room itself. [...]  
EDDIE: Peter, do you mind telling –  
BROCK: There is no...ghost.  
[...]  
ALL THE OTHERS: But it's there! I heard it! I saw it! What's he mean?  
BROCK: Try this for size. It holds an image – and when people go in there they pick it up. What you hear and what you see is inside your brain!  
(Kneale, 1972)

What is occurring here is a translation of the representation of the agency at the source of the phenomena: no more the ghost of a departed woman, but *some kind of* material property of the room itself. The experience is born from an unexplained mediation between two ontologically different domains, the material and the mental. It is, in Thacker's terminology, a *dark mediation*, occurring "not between two points in a single reality, but between two realities" (Thacker, 2013, p.131). From an ontological perspective, this is even more problematic than the acknowledgement of the existence of an objectively observable ghost. The characters, in fact, find themselves dealing with a confusion between the objective and the subjective which cannot be explained through objective data and measurements. Therefore, to make sense of the way the process is unfolding they employ a metaphor which could represent the way the process itself behaves. In other words, not what the process actually is, but what *it is like*:

BROCK: Don't you get it yet? It must work like...a recording. Fixed in the floor and the walls, right in the substance of them. A trace...of what happened in there. And we pick it up. We act as detectors – decoders – amplifiers.

[...]

HARGRAVES: Some kind of natural process?

DOW: But freaky.

BROCK: Perhaps it only occurs under extreme conditions. Some kind of – extreme human output. Emotion. Terror. And it prints off.

[...]

EDDIE: And we're – sensitive to it. (Kneale, 1972)

This is the breakthrough of the stone tape theory, the solution to the paradox of the compenetrating objectivity and subjectivity of the ghost. The unformed and deterritorialising phenomena coming from the Tuning are decrypted in the Detector, by utilising the metaphor of radio reception as a interpretative tool, a *rectification* of the paradoxical incoming signal which becomes meaningful and territorialised within the rules of physical reality.

The process is represented as a bidirectional transmission of information between the physical composition of the room and the human emotional subjectivity. The mind-to-stone transference is metaphorised as a recording medium: strong emotions irradiate

from the human brain, they travel through the space and hit the walls' stones, which physically capture and store such emotional energy. On the other way around, the stone-to-mind mediation is conceived as akin to wireless radio reception: the stones *reverberate* back into the environment the stored emotional energy, and the human brain is able to detect and decode such signals, perceptually reconstructing the past traumatic event. It is fundamentally a modulation-demodulation process: an unknown energy behaves as a *carrier* signal, modulated by the emotional information. The brain can be *tuned to* the carrier frequency (detection), therefore demodulating the signal and retrieving the information (decoding), eventually bringing the information to a perception level (amplification).

The human body becomes an “antenna-body” (Heys, 2019, p.4), at the same time irradiating and receiving psychic energies tuned to the eerie frequencies of the storage room. The affective atmosphere of the eerie discussed in the previous section is literally represented as a waveformed energy characterised by a specific *frequency*. The strength of the people's reaction therefore becomes a matter of mechanical *sensitivity* to that frequency:

STEW: What about me?

BROCK: You? You've got no playback, that's all. Some transistors missing. (Kneale, 1972)

The paradox is solved, ordered, framed as a resonant process. The employment of the radio transmission metaphor expresses a two-fold *resonant* character of the process of the eerie. On one side, the radio communication represents the material resonances, such as the room's reverb, that the characters have identified as a fundamental element in the process of haunting. On the other, the affective and atmospheric relationalities at work in the storage room are discursively understood as *resonance-like* processes: it *must* work *like* a radio, because the haunting process seems to behave similarly to a radio transmission, even if this hypothesis cannot be corroborated by physical proofs.

These two ‘modes of resonance’ are themselves resonating with each other, merging what is conceived as materially resonant and what is interpreted as resonant. This

feedback can be clearly seen during a later apparitional event, when Brock reacts to the ghostly sounds by touching the stones, to try and feel any physical vibration, even if he already knows that no vibratory motion of the stones is directly involved in the haunting (fig.6). This action embodies the compenetrating of the affective into the symbolic: the theorisation of the room's stones as emitting a vibratory energy is not merely a metaphor, a theoretical device, but also considered a potentially genuine physical phenomenon.



Figure 6 - Brock searching for vibrations in the stones during an apparition (*The Stone Tape*, 1972)

### Frequency-shifting across the spectrum

Having formalised a theory of the haunting, the characters realise that the processes they have been witnessing could be the key to develop the “new recording medium” (Kneale, 1972) that is the purpose of their research. Therefore, they plan to understand the physical mechanisms involved in the haunting, to be able to replicate them and to exploit their properties:

JILL'S VOICE (through speaker): What do you want to do?

BROCK: Get control.

[...]

JILL (shaken): Not yet — how could we possibly — ?

BROCK'S VOICE (through speaker): The essence of experiment, Jilly. Put it to the proof! (Kneale, 1972)

Through the narrative device of the technological aim of Ryan Electrics, Kneale stages a representational version of actual scientific experiments found throughout the history of psychical research, as demonstrated in the Antenna's overview of the vibratory theory of psychometry. Therefore, this moment of the teleplay is particularly important from an analytical point of view, not so much for the actual methodological accuracy of the experiments represented, but rather because it provides the starting point to understand how successive, real-world paranormal practices are motivated, at least in part, by the popularity of *The Stone Tape*. Therefore, by analysing the ways practices and ideas are represented in the play, we can retrace the development of paranormal research methodologies from nineteenth-century psychical research to their remediation within the occultural milieu from the 1970s through the medium of fiction.

The characters thus begin a series of scientific experiments in the storage room. With these experiments, they actively attempt to territorialise the haunted room, to claim it as a human territory: they occupy the place with their instruments and technologies, they transform it into another laboratory. If the storage room cannot be used for the function it was originally intended, they transform it into the object of their research. This is an important component of the Detector process: the temporary transformation of a space into another, in order to bring the rules, the affordances and the semiotic interpretation of the first into the latter.

To 'get control' of a process represented as a form of resonance means to understand what vibratory energy could be mediating the transmission and, most importantly, to find the correct frequency at which the system resonates, modulating the stored information. The characters thus employ a trial-and-error experimental approach to progressively reduce the *spectrum* of possible resonant frequencies. It is a sort of 'performative' Fourier Analysis<sup>6</sup>, each time testing a different frequency band of the whole vibratory spectrum, to find at what frequency the room's residual haunting resonates. This progressive filtering can be seen as a territorialising, ordering process, as "[t]he transformation of a set of equally probable statements into a set of unequally

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<sup>6</sup> One of the principal mathematical tools to analyse the frequential components of signals, constituted by the approximate representation of a complex waveform as a sum of simpler waves – usually sinusoids – in specific frequential, phase and amplitude relationships between them.



probable statements amounts to the creation of order” (Latour and Woolgar, 1986, p.244). This is the Detector process in action, a way to literally interpret and analyse an incoming signal by applying specific procedures of semiotic structuring.

As can be expected, the first means of vibration that is tested is sound, in the auditory range. They measure the natural resonance of the stones, to then diffuse the same sonic frequency in the room with a big horn loudspeaker (fig.7):

BROCK: Vibration. He picks up the crowbar and taps it thoughtfully against the wall.

BROCK: Frequency?

EDDIE’S VOICE: Seven forty. BROCK: Right, give me that. Ten secs.

A droning sound hits the ear at the same frequency as the scraping of the crowbar. (Kneale, 1972)



*Figure 7 – The horn loudspeaker used in The Stone Tape (1972).*

We see the characters observing a computer screen showing a visual rendering of the (supposedly) standing waves of the room that are being excited, marking once again the importance of the room’s acoustics in their experiments. However, the experiment does not seem to produce any positive result. A new experiment is thus conducted, this time employing laser light. Then, another experiment, another frequency: ultraviolet lights. We then see stroboscopic light pulses, accompanied by amplitude-modulated sonic textures. In all these cases, too, no apparition is being triggered. With these experiments, the characters are trying to reduce the mutual affective interactions that are at work in the storage room to a linear causal process which could be put in

motion once the correct resonance is discovered and they are able to mechanically trigger the haunting:

BROCK: We're on the right track, just keep going.

EDDIE: You've had a — a response!

[...]

BROCK: Not because of anything we did. It didn't relate. It's got to relate, Eddie. (Kneale, 1972)

Seen as a whole, the experiments can be represented as different steps in a continuous sweep across the electromagnetic spectrum, in search for an eerie resonance which is at the same time material and metaphorical.

For the scientist, such frequencies could be possible candidates to be the mediators of thought transference in telepathy. Once again, similar speculations directly refer to historical psychical research: "is it premature to ask in what way are vibrations connected with thought or its transmission?" (Crookes, 1897, p.98). And as in *The Stone Tape's* narrative, in Crookes too sound is once again used to construct a parallel between the unexplained phenomena and other natural means of communication: "[l]et it be assumed that these rays, [...] can pass into the brain and act on some nervous centre there. Let it be conceived that the brain contains a centre which uses these rays as the vocal cords use sound vibrations" (Crookes, 1897, p.100). In Crookes' case too, it is possible to notice how the ability to perceive the phenomena is related to a capability to be 'in tune with' such vibrations: "[i]s it inconceivable that intense thought concentrated towards a sensitive with whom the thinker is in close sympathy may induce a telepathic chain of brain waves?" (Crookes, 1897, p.100). This example demonstrates the correspondence of the Detector process in *The Stone Tape* and in a relevant historical case in psychical research: the tendency to structure, to frame within a set of determined and discrete elements well known to science. In other word, in Barad's (2003) terms, a reductionist move through the application of a material-discursive apparatus of experimentation which is not only descriptive but constitutive of the phenomenon under examination.

## Refraining the supernatural

As seen above, the experiments conducted in *The Stone Tape* re-enact a discourse common in psychical research and paranormal investigation. The construction of pseudo-scientific hypotheses and their evaluation through experimental practices can be conceived as attempts at framing and territorialising the affective and atmospheric processes of the haunting within consensual representations borrowed from physics. The agencies that seem to emerge during the eerie experience are brought back into the natural domain by interpreting them as the effects of linear, causal relations between bodies and environment involving *some kind of* vibratory mediation. In other words, the unformed, unqualified, affective feeling of the eerie is explained as caused by an interaction with waveformed energies at specific frequencies.

The Detector here benefits of the employment of the process of the refrain as developed by Deleuze and Guattari (1988). After establishing the reality of the haunting, the characters in *The Stone Tape* find themselves immersed in the unhomely zone of the storage room, a chaotic field of affective potentialities and rationality-defying experiences. They therefore construct their ‘fragile centre’: they begin *representing* the haunting as a form of resonant mechanism, based on the mediation of vibratory – i.e. periodical, *rhythmical* – energies. This is the beginning of their territorialising process, the centre from which they would then construct their stone tape theory. The second phase of the refrain is, for Deleuze and Guattari, the creation of a shelter, a home, by drawing a circle (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, p.311) around the centre. It is a boundary-making discursive practice, a *cut* which organises what is kept outside the home – the forces of chaos – and what is organised inside – causal relations, structures, hierarchies of agency.

Correspondingly, the experiments in *The Stone Tape* are a way to order the unstructured continuum of vibratory frequencies, each time *band-pass filtering* specific portions of the spectrum, to find at which frequency the haunting ‘system’ resonates with, metaphorically “moving from the unformed vibrations of chaos into a more orchestrated arrangement of sound” (Bennett, 2001, p.167). As discussed in the previous sections, the result of this process is not a fixed border, but rather an “oscillational” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, p.320) bordering, which defines the

everchanging cartography of a territory which is too “never given as object but always as intense repetition” (Guattari, 1995, p.28). For Deleuze and Guattari, “territorialisation is an act of rhythms that has become expressive” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, p.315): by searching for a physical frequency throughout the electromagnetic spectrum – a rhythmic, periodical variation – the characters try to construct a representation of the process itself; the postulated physical resonance *expresses* the haunting process. Metaphorically, the different experiments in *The Stone Tape* can be conceived as successive attempts at finding the transmission at the crystal set, by adjusting the tuner’s configuration and searching for the effective position of the detecting crystal. In *The Stone Tape*, the scientists select every time a different frequency of the electromagnetic spectrum – and thus reconfiguring the frequential boundaries of the territorial assemblage.

This eventually brings to the third phase of the refraining process, which explains what the consequences of this ever-changing, oscillatory bordering are: “[f]inally, one opens the circle a crack, opens it all the way, lets someone in, calls someone, or else goes out oneself, launches forth” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, p.362). The construction of a territory therefore necessarily involves an opening towards a new outside, the potential for new interactions and new explorations. By experimenting upon the storage room, the characters have not simply transformed it in an ordinary human territory. Instead, they constructed a new territory, with new functions and further potential refrains. The ultimate effect of the Detector in *The Stone Tape* is the construction of new and different resonances:

It becomes the mark, the possibility of a new event (a new virtual potential for things to happen differently), [...] and of a new set of existential territories (these include virtual potentials, physical places, new modes of living, new laws, new sign systems, discourses, rhetorics, new emotions and feelings, new powers to affect and be affected). In sum, a new field of expression arises, a refrain that potentializes other refrains. (Bertlesen and Murphie, 2010, p.142)

Therefore, a new field of affective potentialities is produced through the discursive process of refraining the haunting. *The Stone Tape* shows how these new powers to affect and be affected could bring new agencies that violently escape any human ordering attempt. This is clearly seen towards the end of the film when, after a last,

aggressive sonic intervention caused by Brock's experiments, something suddenly changes:

JILL: It's different.

BROCK (numbed): Eh?

JILL: She's gone.

BROCK: What do you mean?

JILL: Completely. I can tell.

[...]

EDDIE: I'll tell you what he's done! D'you know what he's done? He's wiped the tape! (Kneale, 1972)

The experiments have indeed had an effect. They 'wiped the tape', maybe by overwriting it, maybe by degrading the stored information. This narrative twist expresses another real theorisation on hauntings. In fact, a similar process is found also in Lethbridge's writings, where he states that "it should be possible to short-circuit a ghoul completely away from a place by exhausting its current" (Lethbridge, 1963, p.130). However, the last experiment does not simply erase the haunting. The refraining experiments have opened a crack in the border of the territory, "calling someone" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, p.362) or something. What has been erased is just a surface layer, paving the way for far more dangerous, cosmic weirdnesses coming from "a great depth" (Kneale, 1972):

Huge forms, terrifying in their very lack of definition, with here and there eye-like dots of red light. They move across the ground with that dreadful speed, quartering it like hounds. There is a brute male violence about every movement, a lust to bring down and tear (Kneale, 1972)

Deleuze and Guattari too warn against the dangers of the refraining process, which they associate to rituals of sorcery in which "a mistake in speed, rhythm, or harmony would be catastrophic [...]" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, p.311). Did Brock make a mistake in rhythm? Did he excite the wrong resonances?

sound invades us, impels us, drags us, transpierces us. It takes leave of the earth, as much in order to drop us into a black hole as to open up to a cosmos. It makes us want to die. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, p.348)

Instead of ordering the eerie atmosphere of the storage room, the experiments opened to a different, weirder deterritorialisation, made of different resonances, a “huge, unearthly noise”, that makes Jill “shaken by a spasm of trembling – far more violent than any before” (Kneale, 1972):

such breakaway vibrations put your body in contact with the other potential refrains humming around it, these spiraling sounds come out of the mouths of nonhumans as well as humans (Bennett, 2001, p.168).

At the end of the film, every ordering disastrously collapses. Jill is completely caught in this new resonant monstrosity, which forces her to re-enact the same tragic event that produced the first haunting record. Her own self resonates with the newly emerged chthonic agency to a point of complete saturation: she is eventually trapped in a becoming-vibration recorded into the storage room’s stones, which first manifests itself to a terrified Brock. Jill’s doom becomes Kneale’s final representation of the oscillations – and the conflict – between human and more-than-human territories that have run throughout the whole story. The ‘demons’ the scientists unearth, by silencing forever the woman’s spectral voice imprinted in stone, are not just evil entities from the depths of reality. They are also the ultimate agency to demonstrate the fragility of human rational control over natural processes:

[...] the ending of *The Stone Tape* breaches this reality, reveals it to be a construction just as it reveals this world of technology [...] to be one transient part of a longer history, with new technology not forming the ultimate in progress. Dark, ancient forces maintain their unknowable power, devolving rather than evolving (Rolinson and Devlin, 2008, p.64)

The Detector, amplifying to the point of self-oscillation, feeds back energy into circulation, producing new parasitical signals, towards a new field of potentialities, a new network of affective resonances. In other words, new pacts with demons (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, p.243) that, like the one emerging at the end of *The Stone Tape*, are parasitic autonomous sentiences characterised by “their forsaken status, their immemorial slumber and their provocatively exquisite forms” (Negarestani, 2001, p.224).

## Becoming-theory

The Detector component in *The Stone Tape* has followed the processes through which the play represents how the characters make sense of the spectral phenomena they are exposed to. Moreover, the way they gradually build an experimental apparatus through which they frame the rationality-defying happenings within pseudo-scientific boundaries, imagining ways to control and exploit the paranormal agencies involved. *The Stone Tape* can be seen as a fictional translation of theories, hypotheses and imageries that accompanied the history of psychical research in its quest to explain the experiences of haunting as a form of embodied and emotional resonance with the past of the place. This section aims to demonstrate how the BBC play had an instrumental role in the diffusion of such theories and practices beyond the niche of paranormal enthusiasts, and instead making them known – and most importantly, *applicable* – in a cohesive and accessible form to mainstream culture as well.

Even if ‘only’ a television drama, *The Stone Tape* became over the years a reference text for paranormal researchers and haunting enthusiasts, and the catchy title itself became a convenient term to refer to the aforementioned hypotheses on haunting. The metaphorical reference to the magnetic tape, which is never found before the teleplay, began to spread as a concept whose notoriety quickly surpassed the BBC play itself. A relevant example can be found in the writings of the influential Colin Wilson who, comparing Lethbridge’s theories and Oliver Lodge’s theories of psychical research, exemplifies the two investigators’ ideas by referring to stones and their symbolic magnetic tape-like properties:

If a stone can somehow ‘record’ the emotions of a man who threw it more than two thousand years ago, is it not equally possible that the ‘field’ of water can somehow record emotions, like a magnetic tape? (Wilson, 1978, p.60)

Here Wilson describes the hypothesis openly mentioning stone tapes without mentioning Kneale’s play. This happens also a few years later, in 1985, in one of the episodes of *Arthur C. Clarke’s World of Strange Powers*, in which the writer presents the ‘stone tape theory’, without any reference to the TV programme. From the late seventies, in fact, a ‘stone tape theory’ begins to spread as an original theory on

hauntings, and the original TV play, if mentioned at all, is not considered the originator of the concept, but rather one of the many texts that helped popularise and develop the concept. Today, the 'stone tape theory' is widely mentioned in paranormal discourse and can be found in numerous texts and online discussions on the topic of hauntings. Barlow (2023) considers it a valuable hypothesis to explain the haunting case of the Borley Rectory, one of the most famous cases in the field, while Townsend (2021) identifies the stone tape theory as one of the most relevant modern interpretations of haunting phenomena. Its popularity is in fact highly rising, and it is found mentioned in popular paranormal investigation shows such as *Most Haunted* as well (Rowney, 2018).

However, it also attracts numerous criticisms. For instance, Wood (2010) declares that the stone tape theory "fails to be a scientific theory as the process is not properly explained and the theory is not testable", and Hill fiercely debunks it from a sceptical perspective, declaring that "it's not a theory, it doesn't make physical sense, and there is no known mechanism for how it works at all. It was simply a good fictional movie" (Hill, 2017). The criticisms that are here moved towards the stone tape theory, most of all, are a demonstration of a particular cultural process at work, one of a positive feedback loop in which a 150 years-old idea continuously circulates to today, oscillating between theory and fiction, between interpretation of a lived experience and a narrative device. And this movement, amplifying the idea of the stone tape well beyond the scope of the original TV play, arrives at obtaining an almost autonomous life, a hyperstitional process of resonance between reality and fiction that will recur throughout the successive two case studies as well. It is possible to observe in this case how the Detector can function as (cultural) amplifier and, as mentioned in the methodology chapter, a feedback loop which transforms a radio receiver into a device capable of emitting signals itself. This new form of parasitic radio emanation emits in this case a fictional signal, which spreads in time and space fictional ideas that are however captured by other antennas, passing through differently tuned Tuners, and then further interpreted by different Detectors, transforming them in ideas considered as legitimate theories.





## 5. The Philip Experiment

### 5.1 Introduction

With its focus on *The Stone Tape*, the last chapter traced a partial analysis of the modes of the eerie in the context of experiences of haunting. By treating the BBC play as a theory-fiction, representative of some of the most relevant theories of the history of psychical research, the analysis used resonant phenomena and resonance-based discourses as epistemological tools to understand the processes of *spontaneous*, individual experiences of the paranormal, highlighting interactions and relationalities emerging in reverberant physical spaces. This chapter, building from the preceding one, will attempt at extending the scope of the research to include the processes of the eerie in the cases where the haunted territory – the space of interaction which allows for the potentiality of the paranormal – is not a pre-existing physical space but is instead constructed from interactions occurring in specifically discursively-framed performative spaces.

As Bennett claims, “[e]nchantment is something that we encounter, that hits us, but it is also a comportment that can be fostered through deliberate strategies” (Bennett, 2001, p.4). Enchantment, therefore, can be considered as happening within a field oscillating between the spontaneous encounter and the practice to trigger, catalyse and amplify it through specific techniques. In the spontaneous case, *The Stone Tape* provided a relevant example, with the scientist Jill becoming the unwitting witness of the apparitional event. Regarding practice, paranormal discourse often refers to resonant technologies and resonance-like processes: some of which material, some spiritual, some psychological, some psychoactive, and more. This second chapter will focus on practices that deliberately foster the sensation of the eerie, and that are used by practitioners to engage in communicative interactions with non-human agencies charged with paranormal meaning.

The case study examined is the so-called Philip Experiment: a parapsychological experiment conducted by the Toronto Society for Psychical Research between 1972

and 1978, led by mathematician and genetist Dr. George Owen. Owen, born in Bristol in 1919, was an active figure in the psychical research milieu of the sixties, a former member of the SPR before moving to Canada, and writer of a number of books on the matter, such as the widely circulated *Can We Explain the Poltergeist?* (Owen, 1964). In Toronto he founded the local society for Psychical Research, a “privately run association, organized on a voluntary basis” (Owen and Sparrow, 1976, p.2), and the related journal, *New Horizons*.

The Philip Experiment is the most famous activity conducted by the Society, a five years-long experiment involving: Al (heating engineer), Lorne (industrial engineer), Andy (housewife), Bernice (accountant), Dorothy (housewife), Sidney (student), Sue (Chair of Mensa for Canada), Iris (author), and George Owen himself (Owen and Sparrow, 1976). The experiment was centred around the search for the establishment of a communication with a fictional ghost in a (para)scientific laboratory setting. The principal aim of the experiment was to assess the hypothesis that ghostly apparitions, poltergeists and the traditional séance phenomena are not caused by spiritual residues of departed humans, but they are instead of psychokinetic origin. Spiritualist phenomena are thus considered to be the product of a collective imagination which is somehow capable of exceeding the subjective boundaries of individual cognition. Such phenomena are even conceived as capable of assuming a transitional presence whose visual perception is shared by the participants:

Just as in a group situation one can produce telepathy, could it not happen that if a group of people had a mutual rapport they might see a ghost together as a group? Could one, in fact, create one's own ghost deliberately in the form of a shared hallucination? (Owen and Sparrow, 1976, p.5)

Throughout the experiment, the group allegedly succeeded in deploying the physical phenomena traditionally associated with Spiritualism, such as raps, vibrations, noises, and table movements. As already mentioned, the strong sonic and vibratory-based phenomenology of the experience – and the rich literature which is available about the case – makes the Philip Experiment a valuable case study for this research. The Antenna section will here outline some of the fundamental trajectories that compose the influences, the theoretical framework and the discursive apparatus of the Philip

Experiment. These will be fundamental to set up the material-discursive apparatus of the Tuner, and thus to create the conditions for the successful conjuration of paranormal phenomena.

## 5.2 Antenna

### Parapsychology and Occulture in the 1970s

The Philip Experiment sits within the (oc)cultural and (para)scientific epistemes of the period between the sixties and the early seventies: an extremely culturally, socially and politically dense era which – among the many transformations that it globally brought – had a crucial importance in the renewed interest in occult, esoteric and spiritual themes, the so-called re-enchantment of the West (Partridge, 2005). On one side, in fact, seventies' popular culture is imbued with supernatural notions through cinema, literature and comics. On the other, countercultural and subcultural groups produced and diffused an intricate web of concepts, beliefs, practices and postures connected with the esoteric milieu which would later be termed occulture: a term which connects “those often *hidden, rejected and oppositional* beliefs and practices associated with esotericism, theosophy, mysticism, New Age, Paganism, and a range of other subcultural beliefs and practices” (Partridge, 2005, p.68).

The Toronto group and their approach to the paranormal should be contextualised within a cultural milieu formed by an assemblage of New Age movements, the expansion of Scientology, the rising of the second school of ufology with John Keel and Jacques Vallée, the psychedelic culture of Terence McKenna, Timothy Leary and John Lilly, the gnostic science-fiction of Philip Dick and Robert Anton Wilson, the TV appearances of alleged psychics Ingo Swann and Uri Geller, the battles of the sceptics such as James Randi, the diffusion of paperbacks by T.C. Lethbridge and Colin Wilson, the fantasy epic of *The Lord of the Rings* and the best seller *The Morning of the Magicians* (Pawels and Bergier, 1960), among the countless many other. Of course, it is within this same milieu and this fascination for esoteric, ‘other’ worldviews that the BBC began to repurpose old influential ghost stories in TV productions, as well as

commissioning new and updated ones, such as Sasdy and Kneale's *The Stone Tape*. An enormous number of directions, discourses and movements can be traced during this age, many of which only tangential to the Philip Experiment but nonetheless crucial to understand not only the wider cultural context but also some of the causes behind the most recent instances of paranormal discourse, that will be investigated in the next chapter.

However, the paranormal liaisons happening in the seventies are not confined to popular culture and fringe subcultures. The New Horizon Journal and the Toronto Society for Psychical Research emerged among a fervent environment that saw psychical research slowly transforming into parapsychology, changing approach and space, entering universities and institutional environments, assuming a liminal position in between the academia and the fringe para-scientific practice. In general, while traditional psychical research was born "from an encounter between the scientism of the Victorian naturalists" (Asprem, 2010, p.634), the new parapsychology shifted the focus "from anecdotal to experimental evidence" (Asprem, 2010, p.651), with a strong focus on ESP. In general, parapsychology is defined by:

attempts to explain paranormal and related beliefs and ostensibly paranormal experiences in terms of known (or knowable) psychological and physical factors. It is directed at understanding bizarre experiences that many people have, without assuming that there is anything paranormal involved. (French and Stone, 2017, p.2)

The Parapsychology Laboratory at Duke University, founded in the 1930s by psychologist J.B. Rhine, is the origin place of an influential development of the psychical research paradigm that, together with a substantial change of the episteme in the discipline, in the early seventies facilitated a flourishing of groups, institutes and research centres, inside and outside academia: for instance, the Institute of Noetic Sciences; the Princeton Engineering Anomalies Research Lab; the SORRAT group; the Maimonides Dream Lab; the Parapsychological Association; and even the CIA-funded research on remote viewing, the Star Gate project led by Russell Targ and Harold Puthoff at the Stanford Research Institute.

It is important to notice that, while seemingly proposing conflicting views, parapsychology and occulture are far from being separate and in epistemological opposition. For instance, “while it originally set out to naturalise the supernatural, the cultural significance of parapsychology is rather that it facilitated a re-enchantment of science and secular culture in the process” (Asprem, 2010, p.634). Moreover, they combine and to some extent overlap in their common preoccupation on the complex relationship between mind and matter, both proposing psychic-based models of communication at distance. Even more, as Davis efficaciously stated, both occulture and parapsychology engage in a mutual resonant relationship with the times’ technological and scientific discourse, in particular about the idea of information as something which “becomes a thing-in-itself, an almost metaphysical substance that, through its technological instantiation in networks, massively shapes both individual and collective existence” (Davis, 2019, p.393).

The parapsychological approach of the Philip experiment, characterised by a strong scientific and experimental posture, is in fact particularly focused on communication and mediation dynamics, as well as with the problem of the apparent paradoxical interaction between mind and matter, already encountered as one of the fundamental conditions for paranormal experiences. The Philip Experiment’s engagement with the modes, the practices and the discourse of parapsychology is a fundamental element of this Antenna. It will be important for the Tuner as well, as this approach frames the experiential apparatus of the eerie from a para-scientific, experimental framework. However, as will be discussed in detail in the Tuner, a connection with a traditional view of Spiritualism is far from lost, with particular regards to the modes and phenomenologies of traditional spirit communication.

### **On raps, and two hundred years of signals in the noise**

With its emphasis on psychic communication and on the search for a potential ESP networking mechanism, the Philip experiment is deeply rooted in the parapsychological episteme of the seventies (Asprem, 2010). However, as the analysis will demonstrate, the Toronto group still maintained a tight connection with the paradigm of 1800s psychical research and Victorian Spiritualism. Indeed, it is precisely from a discursive resonance with the classic modes of the séance that the whole experiment unfolds:

the reference to traditional forms of spirit communication is in fact a crucial component of the whole territorialising process of the experiment. In particular, a crucial element of analysis here will be the Philip group's strong focus on the sonic as a source of the eerie, which will be described at length throughout the chapter. This is another element that is directly borrowed from the earliest stirrings of Spiritualism, traceable back to the controversial case of the 'Rochester rappings', in New York, 1848. This famous case, which had a global cultural resonance and is usually identified as the originator of modern Spiritualism, involved an alleged haunting happening in the house of the Fox family, with recurrent mysterious noises and raps in the building's walls and furniture. When the two young sisters Catherine and Margaretta Fox begin interacting with the disembodied agency by 'playing' with it – effectively inventing a communication method based on raps which would be then utilised in séances for almost two centuries – the family learned that the source of the disturbances was the spirit of an individual called Charles B. Rosna, allegedly murdered in the house some years earlier and buried in the cellar.

While the nature of the rappings has been at the centre of endless debates between fierce debunking (Houdini, 1924) and the possibility of at least genuine beginnings (James, 1911), the connection between ghosts and disembodied ambient noises originates long before the case of the Fox sisters. Reports of similar events are found as early as the Middle Ages (Guiley, 1992, p.408). Among the most famous examples in modern times are the so-called Drummer of Tedworth in 1661, the haunting of the Old Rectory at Epworth in 1709 (Addington Bruce, 1908), the case of the Bell Witch in Tennessee, 1817 (Ingram, 1894), or the alleged poltergeist 'Scratching Fanny' which disturbed the inhabitants of Cock Lane in 1762 (Lang, 1844). It could be even said that the modern history of spirits and ghosts is indissolubly connected with the notion of raps. What is particularly interesting in many of these cases is that the knocks, blows and scratches that fill the accounts of spirit communication throughout the centuries often seem to have the role of triggering a historical and biographical dimension of the place where the séance is conducted. The raps, in fact, are interpreted as hauntological expressions of the past agency of the ghosts of specific individuals and particular stories, reminiscences of personalities who psychically make the walls vibrate as a reminder of their existence, their grudge, and the tragedy that makes them unable to serenely depart from the material world.

However, the case of the Fox sisters stands out for its particularly unique and crucial communicative dynamics. The Rochester events, in fact, are the first documented attempt at opening a bi-directional channel of communication with the disembodied noises. It is the first time the raps are not only imbued with agency and identity, but also with intelligence and responsivity. The day of the 31<sup>st</sup> of May, 1848, is usually recognised as the anniversary of this paradigm shift. That night, while the family was at the time already struggling to find the source of the mysterious noises, the two young sisters Margie and Katie tried to 'play' with the raps. From the deposition of Mrs. Fox:

My husband had not gone to bed when we first heard the noise on this evening. [...] It commenced as usual. [...] The girls, who slept in the other bed in the room, heard the noise, and tried to make a similar noise by snapping their fingers. The youngest girl [...] is the one who made her hand go. As fast as she made the noise with her hands or fingers, the sound was followed up in the room. It did not sound any different at that time, only it made the same number of noises that the girl did. When she stopped, the sound itself stopped for a short time. The other girl, [...] then spoke in sport and said, "Now do this just as I do. Count one, two, three, four," [...] striking one hand in the other at the same time. The blows which she made were repeated as before. (Lewis, 1848, p.6)

A single snap of fingers and Spiritualism is born. From that moment, the news of the rapping house began to quickly spread across the country, the sisters started a remunerative but consuming career as the first world-famous mediums, and the rappings became a cultural sensation for decades to come. It all started with a playful recognising of intentionality, the same "childlike creativity" (Owen and Sparrow, 1976, p.86) that would be a fundamental component of the Philip sittings, an 'as if' mindset which attunes to the potentiality of eerie communication. Indeed, it is an important component that will compose the Tuner process of the Philip Experiment. For Bennett, in fact, a strategy to conjure the sense of enchantment is "to give greater expression to the sense of play" (Bennett, 2001, p.4). And this strange sense of play is indeed what created a new dark mediation (Thacker, 2013) between the material and the spirit worlds, not through evidence of the existence of ghosts, but through a novel, psychic communication technology. It is effectively a 'spiritual telegraph' which, together with the electrical one invented just five years prior, would soon be "progenitors of two radically different histories of "tele-communications" (Sconce, 2000, p.24).



The Antenna, therefore, brings in the radio model of the Philip Experiment a mode of communication which will become the fulcrum of the Tuner and Detector processes. While in *The Stone Tape* the experiencers are interpreted as “detectors, decoders, amplifiers” (Kneale, 1972), thus fundamentally a radio *receiver*, the communicative chain invented by the Fox sisters is understood as two-way: a bidirectional conversation with fingers snapping on the human end, and disembodied raps in the walls coming from the spirit end. In this new, experimental and playful media configuration, the instruction “do as I do”, given by the little Katie Fox, is what opens the communication channel, what attunes to a mutual interaction.

By recalling the recollections made by Lewis (1848), the first four finger snaps act as test tone: not yet as message, but as an investigation on whether there could potentially be a communication channel; an eerie question on the possibility of mediation. It is a test on the efficacy of this new sonic-psychical telegraphic transmission: a primary symbol – the number four – is encoded in a secondary symbol (Pierce, 2012) – four sound events – and sent through the ‘dark’ channel connecting the two worlds. At the other end, the eerie receiver must be able to correctly decode the message – four sounds in rapid order – and to reproduce them in the exact number and the same rhythm, a task that helps to minimise the possibility to potentially mistake the ordinary noises that old houses commonly produce as an intelligent, deliberate answer. This experimental test of symbolic communication, signal and noise, predating the concept of wireless telegraph<sup>7</sup> resonated throughout the history of modern Western culture, as emphatically expressed by the spiritualism-enthusiast Arthur Conan Doyle:

It was on this night that one of the great points of psychic evolution was reached [...] That rude room, with its earnest, expectant, half-clad occupants with eager upturned faces, its circle of candlelight, and its heavy shadows lurking in the corners, might well be made the subject of a great historical painting. (Doyle, 1926, p.59)

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<sup>7</sup> While the first electric telegraph message was sent in 1844, it is only with the application of the spark-gap transmitter by Marconi in 1894 that the telegraph enters in its wireless age, thus technologically satisfy the dream of a communication at a distance.

To summarise, through the Antenna section the analysis identified two fundamental directions which will frame the material and discursive dynamics of the Philip Experiment: Spiritualist spirit communications based on sounds and vibrations on one side, and parapsychology on the other. This information that the Antenna captures will construct the signal that the Philip experiment will tune into: a spiritualist practice reterritorialised through the scientific method to explain the paranormal interaction between subjectivity and external affective intensities.

### 5.3 Tuner

This Tuner section will be focused on the practices, the performances and the group dynamics that were carried out by the members of the Toronto group to create the territorial conditions for the eerie to emerge, within the temporary time and space of their experimental sessions. Some of the fundamental processes here investigated will be how the members designed their experiments, what practice modes they employed and how sound and vibratory phenomena were involved in the performative development of the séance. In the radio model, these are the components that constitute the Tuner: the elements that define the resonant frequency of the experiment, the frequency to attune to in order for the eerie to emerge.

This Tuner is particularly interesting if read adjacently to the corresponding one in *The Stone Tape* chapter: the dialogue between the two case studies, both born in 1972 and concocted in the similar (oc)cultural milieu, manifests strong similarities, in terms of the phenomenology of the eerie and the onto-epistemological relevance of resonance-based processes. While *The Stone Tape* represented, in fictional form, a typical spontaneous experience of haunting, this chapter will trace how the eerie can be actively constructed by a group of people through specific practices and mental dispositions, attunements and performances. The potentiality of the paranormal continues to be, in this case as well, a problem of construction and embodiment of a different, anomalous territory, separated by the everyday world but at the same time contiguous with it.

In this section, therefore, the development of the Philip Experiment will be analysed, from its unsuccessful beginnings to the emergence of physical sonic phenomena charged with eerie questions of agency (Fisher, 2017). Successively, the process will be reconstructed in its intertwined components, highlighting how the eerie emerged thanks to the ‘correct’ engineering of a series of carefully tuned performative ‘resonators’. The consequences of such processes will be therefore taken into consideration, in particular, with respect to the construction of a temporary haunted space where the experimental séances take place. The phenomenology of Philip will then be studied, to understand how sonic and vibratory phenomena produced the communicative agency of Philip, and how, in turn, Philip was collectively and bodily performed by the group.

### **The development of the Philip Experiment**

In their writings (Owen and Sparrow, 1976), the Philip group openly declare the inspiration of previous research conducted by parapsychologists Batchelor (1966) and Brookes-Smith and Hunt (1970) published for the Proceedings of the SPR. The Toronto experiment shares the same aim of its precursors: the demonstration that “paranormal phenomena are forms of unusual human behaviour which are occasionally manifested exosomatically when the conditions are favourable” and that psychokinesis is a “psychological skill which can be acquired through aptitude and experience” (Brookes-Smiths and Hunt, 1970, p.266). To do so, the group decided to try to produce a visual apparition of an entirely fictional character: an “artificial ghost” (Owen and Sparrow, 1974, p.6) which, being collectively invented by the members, could not be mistaken for the spirit of a deceased person, and whose apparition would thus prove the psychological nature of ghosts.

From 1972 the group began to gather together in weekly sessions to discuss and define the character of the fictional ghost, its biography, appearance, as well as its historical and cultural context. Once invented the basic characteristics of ‘Philip’, the members would continue to discuss together to further refine it and, importantly, to progressively reinforce their collective imagery of the fictional ghost. In the story emerging from the first sessions Philip is an aristocratic Englishman living in the middle of Seventeenth century. He is married with a “beautiful but cold and frigid wife,

Dorothea” (Owen and Sparrow, 1974, p.7). He then falls in love with a “beautiful dark-eyed raven-haired gypsy girl, Margo” (Owen and Sparrow, 1974, p.7), with whom he begins a passionate secret affair. Once the affair is exposed, the lover Margo gets convicted of witchcraft, accused of having magically seduced Philip, and burned alive. Philip is too afraid for his reputation to try to save his lover, but the remorse for his inaction corrodes him to the point of committing suicide. This grudge prevents Philip’s soul to serenely depart from the land of the living, thus becoming a ghost. He can still be seen wandering in his house for centuries, and only knowing that Margo has forgiven him would let Philip find peace.

The story of Philip is filled with the most common clichés of the gothic ghost story, such as tropes of love, betrayal, and tragic death: all elements that the horror genre has set as necessary conditions for a desperate soul to become a ghost. Such overuse of clichés is considered by the group as a necessary choice, as it would contribute to give Philip’s biography “sufficient resemblance to a traditional historical apparition, with his story of drama and tragedy, to be “believable” as a ghost of that period.” (Owen and Sparrow, 1976, p.16). Philip, in other words, must be a ‘believable’ ghost, something that the members would “see [...] as a person who had existed” (Owen and Sparrow, 1976, p.15) and, at the same time, continue to recognise as an unmistakably fictional invention.

However, the elements that the group points as necessary for the story’s credibility are imbued with sexist stereotypes remediated by gothic tropes and the “witchploitation” (Scovell, 2021) films and literature popularised by seventies’ countercultures, where witchcraft and the occult were indissolubly connected to erotic exploitation and extreme imageries. The believability of Philip – and the emotional connection that the group of researchers establishes with it – is therefore rooted in discriminatory connections between female bodies, sexuality and witchcraft which, even if claimed as ‘mere’ storytelling devices, are imbued with essentialist connotations precisely because the validation and credibility role the group place in them. Philip’s story develops from the recognition of the wife’s ‘frigidity’ which stereotypically frictions with her physical attractiveness. This sexist premise yields toward another gender and racial stereotype, that of the “gypsy girl” Margo, perpetuating the view of traveller women as cunning and prone to seduce men by exploiting their sexuality and even their magic. Philip, on the

other hand, is represented as a man deceived for its psychological fragility, but somehow justified by his unhappy marriage with a 'frigid' woman. At the same time, the tragedy of women persecution during the Seventeenth century's witch trials is reduced to a narrative tool to charge Philip's despair and regret and thus *allowing* him to become a ghost.

The story of Philip, and therefore the whole, fundamental narrative apparatus of the experiment, is not only imbued with sexist connotations, but stereotypes such as those identified above are considered crucial aspects for Philip's biography believability and principal sources for the emotional attachment of the participants to the artificial ghost. In fact, every participant of the experiment had to agree to Philip's story as well as having a shared affective connection with his tragic life and his motives. This fact exemplifies how elements of sexual and ethnic inequality are essentially embedded in a classical conceptualisation of ghosts and hauntings, as well as in the practice of psychical research. Sex and ethnic stereotypes thus are an important component of the Tuner of the Philip Experiment, as some of the fundamental elements of the apparatus of experimentations that constructs the potential for the experience of the eerie.

Through these problematic tropes, the character of Philip was finalised and its imagery shared and agreed by each participant, the proper experiment was ready to begin. The objective was to actively try to produce an external apparition of the artificial ghost. Methodologically, this was carried out by gathering together and engage in sessions of intense, focused meditation on Philip and his story. To further attune to Philip, they would decorate the place with various objects related to Philip's times, photos, books and playing records of Seventeenth century musical compositions. If their hypothesis would have been correct, their combined psychic energy would have been able to somehow influence each other's mind in a collective, shared hallucination.

The group gathered together on a weekly basis for a year, "sitting in a circle round a table, and meditating in silence [...] up to half an hour" (Owen and Sparrow, 1974, p.8), focusing on "the hope and expectation that Philip might materialize in the middle of that" (Owen and Sparrow, 1976, p.17). After the meditation, they would engage in conversations to share each other's experience and to reflect on their feelings during

the session. However, no tangible result was ever registered by any member of the group. Therefore, at the end of the first year and with a growing sense of discouragement, the group acknowledged the failure of the project: “[n]othing of any real value had been obtained. No apparition of any kind had been seen, and it seemed pointless to continue” (Owen and Sparrow, 1976, p.20).

However, while the group was almost ready to abandon the whole project, a member discovered the research conducted by parapsychologists Batcheldor (1966) and Brookes-Smith and Holt (1970). In papers published some years earlier by the London Society for Psychical Research, they claimed that, through a methodology consisting of rationalised version of the séance inspired by Victorian Spiritualism, they were able to achieve surprising physical phenomena in a laboratory setting. Raps, knocks, table movement and table levitations were allegedly reproduced in a controlled scientific environment for the first time, and thus made demonstrable as a psychokinetic power of common people’s brains. For Batcheldor and the other researchers, the fundamental condition to obtain such results was a strong emotional rapport between the members as well as a shared, willing suspension of disbelief: “one should believe that it can happen, and not to be surprised when it does” (Owen and Sparrow, 1976, p.147).

The methodology of the researchers was essentially to repurpose the modes and processes of the traditional mediumistic séance, while adopting a much different posture than the serious, meditative one of the Philip group: in the heydays of Spiritualism, in fact, “the participants sat around in a relaxed and jolly atmosphere, singing songs and hymns, making jokes, and carrying on a conversation among themselves” (Owen and Sparrow, 1976, p.22). On one side, the construction of specific atmospheres within the time and space of the session is an important element in a faithful reenactment of Victorian spiritualist séance which, contrarily to more modern fictional representations often had the tendency to be “far from solemn, and could be downright hilarious” (Connor 1999, p.204). Moreover, to connote the séances with light-hearted atmosphere was a way to further distance their ‘scientific’ approach to the more serious, dogmatic mood of the religious Spiritualism of, for instance, Allan Kardec (1857).

The Philip group soon decided to adopt Batcheldor's method, convinced by the scientific rigour of the papers, although "a little inhibited in producing an atmosphere of singing and jokes." (Owen and Sparrow, 1974, p.9). Indeed, this new approach allegedly paid off: in the various writings of the group it can be read how, in fact, just after a few sessions, the first paranormal phenomena started to emerge. First, a subtle "feeling of vibration" (Owen and Sparrow, 1974, p.9) of the table, followed by auditory events such as raps and knocks seemingly coming from within the table. Once the raps began to recur at every session, the group adopted the traditional telegraph-like communication method common in Spiritualism, where the spirit was asked to respond to questions via a rudimentary "one rap for Yes and two for no" (Owen and Sparrow, 1974, p.9).

The in-depth analysis of the phenomenology of the Philip experiment, with its role in the construction of the eerie, will be conducted below. Meanwhile, it is here relevant to note how the 'successful' achievements of the group were not related to visual apparitions – as they initially aimed for – but rather to the auditory events more traditionally aligned with Spiritualism's methods and outcomes. The Tuning component of the Philip Experiment is here seen as framed within discursive and narrative structures. This is an almost opposite move than the one seen in *The Stone Tape*, where the attunement to the potentiality of the paranormal was happening through affective and pre-representational resonance with space through the medium of reverb. We can instead see how the signals captured by the Antenna – Spiritualist phenomenologies and parapsychological methodologies – here converge in the definition of a practice oriented towards the performative enactment of a story. This has the role to temporarily territorialise a space as haunted space, for the time and the space of the experimental session. This is a process, as will be discussed below, of creation of a temporary field of interaction within which is possible to experience agencies that cannot exist outside, in the everyday world of the group's living room.

### **The process in the Philip Experiment**

*The Stone Tape* Tuner revealed how the encounter with the paranormal can be analytically modelled as a process of entering in a specific territory, contiguous to the everyday one but at the same time separated from it through a boundary made of

sonorous and vibratory processes. In the play, the characters needed to exit the human-ordered territory of the laboratory and progressively reach the reverberant storage room, a space of sonic interaction defined by affective arrangements, affordances, resonances which create the potentiality of the encounter and the communication with *different* agencies: some non-human – such as reverbs and echoes – some even non-natural. In the case of the Philip experiment, the deterritorialising process does not correspond to a spatial movement; rather, the séance is conducted in the participants' living room, an everyday, human-ordered space. It is in fact through performative practices that the Philip group constructs what could be considered a temporary haunting, staging the atmosphere (Böhme, 2016) of the eerie in an everyday environment, by the means of the practice of the Spiritualist séance.

To understand these territorial dynamics, the change of methodology that happened after the first, unsuccessful year of the Philip experiment is a valuable starting point. During the first phase, the group attempted to produce a visual apparition, an *image*:

At this stage our group was still thinking primarily, not of producing raps or movements, but of an actual ghost. They wanted to see Philip, and they were only concerned with a visible apparition (Owen and Sparrow, 1976, p.25)

This phase is therefore defined by an unidirectional and deterministic approach: intense meditation is expected to produce psychical energy which would then generate a visual object – a ghost – appearing *out there*, in the middle of the living room. As seen in the previous chapter, the experience of the paranormal is instead essentially a relational one, in which particular resonance-based interactions with the environment produce that question of agency which is at the basis of the sensation of the eerie. Instead, in this first phase of the Philip experiment there is no resonance in motion, no affective attunement established between them and the place. And therefore, no deterritorialisation from the human-ordered world: they attempted to produce a ghost in a place completely defined by human agencies, in a territory perfectly obeying the ordinary discursive and performative rules of the human everyday. In other words, a place where a ghost is ontologically and epistemologically an impossibility. When, instead, they switched to Batchelder's séance-based approach, Philip suddenly stops



being a mental image to be 'projected' onto material reality and becomes a communicative agency which has to be conjured with the opening of the correct channel. Once again the Tuner is a matter of ordering and agency: the Philip group started achieving results when they stopped trying to exert their (psychical, telepathic) agency on the fictional ghost, while instead performatively and discursively creating the favourable conditions for Philip to manifest itself as communicative agency, to be experienced *as a group entity*.

With the second methodology, the experiment ceases to be centred on the stimulation of an objective event, and a visual-centred one. Instead, it became the construction of an experimental apparatus which would allow for the collective experience of intentional non-human agencies, based on auditory-based ambiguous and subtle feelings. Here the agency is not something objectively existing in the room, nor solely a product of the mind, but an emergent phenomenon of intra-action, which "in contrast with the usual "interaction", which assumes that there are separate individual agencies that precede their interaction, [it] recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action" (Barad, 2007, p.33).

This methodological shift had conceptual implications which influenced the whole experiment and fundamentally changed its principal aim: from the capturing of physical phenomena and demonstrating their human, psychical nature, to an interest in the group communicative relationships that particular psychical attunements can mediate. In fact, in the context of this new approach to the experiment, potential physical phenomena cease to be the ultimate goal, to become "merely as evidence of the spirit's presence and as a means of communication for the spirit to use, and not of special importance in themselves" (Owen and Sparrow, 1976, p.23). What becomes really important, instead, is the mediated dynamics of the *feeling* of communication that emerges through the application of traditional Spiritualist procedures, and how this performance of a communication arrives at posing a question on the agency and the intelligence behind the occurring phenomena. In other words, by returning to Fisher's terminology, the focus of the experiment shifts from the weird to the eerie: from the search for a confrontation with a reality-defying presence – Fisher's weird – to the performative construction of the eerie, a "question of the agency of the immaterial and the inanimate" (Fisher, 2017, p.11).

## The centre of the séance space

The first problem that needs to be analysed in the context of the tuning process of the Philip Experiment is, similarly to what was explored for *The Stone Tape*, a fundamental problem of territories. In other words, the interest here is to trace the practices and the performances carried out by the group to create a suitable territory for the emergence of the sensation of the eerie, as the necessary preparation for a haunting. What is, therefore, the process to create the conditions for the communicative experience of Philip? What form of arrangement is needed, between discursive framing and affective intensities? By following the radio model methodology, every communication must be prepared by tuning the receiver's bandpass filter to the correct frequency, opening up the potential channel of communication which would allow messages to be received from and sent to the other end. In Deleuze and Guattari's (1988) terms, therefore, the centre of the territory can be modelled as a frequency, that frequency that would then define the oscillatory, repetitional process of territorial bordering.

In their written reflections the group often stresses the importance of the first, seemingly unsuccessful year. The first, meditation-centred methodology, at the time considered only a time-consuming failure, was then requalified as a fundamental phase, the one that harmonised the strong rapport between the members and cemented their mutual agreement on Philip's biography and personality. This is for the group a necessary aspect for the experiment itself, and one of the fundamental variables for the later successful communications obtained through séances. The regular meetings, the intense focus on Philip, and in general the affection and emotional bonds that were forming between the members are the key variable to understand how, in the refraining process of territorialisation, the centre was generated. Over the first year of gatherings, the members built "quite a degree of telepathy" (Owen, 1975, p.19) between each other, "preparing themselves for results" (Owen and Sparrow, 1976, p.73). In other words, the first year of meditation was the way by which the group collectively attuned to Philip, creating the conditions for the experiment, the "belief and expectation that the phenomena can happen" (Owen and Sparrow, 1976, p.75). In fact, in the newly adopted methodology, "[t]he determining factor seemed to be the mental disposition" (Owen and Sparrow, 1976, p.22), and "just any group of

people, sitting around “cold”, so to speak, would have very little chance of success.” (Owen and Sparrow, 1976, p.73).

Meeting to meditate and discuss on Philip, familiarising with its image, the music of its times, its places, and so on, was the way to make the idea of Philip *resonate* between the members and within every action performed by the group. The group’s rapport and collective focus on Philip therefore became the source, the pivotal point that informed and defined the performance of the traditional séance, its aims, its focus, the modes and rules of the group interaction. It is the centre of the territory, the fulcrum from where the territory itself grows, as will be seen, vibrationally. Here is where the tuning process begins to occur. In a radio receiver, the tuner is an apparatus of resonance whose resonant frequency is determined by the structural characteristics of its individual components. Material design choices thus direct the *potential* oscillation modes of the system, which frequency would pass through, and which ones would be suppressed. Correspondingly, in the Philip Experiment the psychological, narrative and emotional focus of the members towards the context of Philip’s life – with images, sounds, music and objects – are the components that allowed for the communication with Philip, and *precisely* with Philip, among the infinite potential agencies. In a radio tuner, the determination of a specific resonant frequency, however, only creates the conditions for the receiving of communication: it allows for the potential for communication without however providing any certainty that it would occur. In a similar vein, such preparatory attunements carried out by the Philip group will only create the field where an interaction could happen. In other words, the centre of the refrain is just the pivotal point around which the border can be drawn: a border that is fundamental for organising affective intensities within the semiotic rules of the territory itself.

The mutual rapport between the members, at an affective and emotional level, is considered so important to be even believed as a principal factor directly influencing the material dynamics of the psychokinetic phenomena:

It seems that combination of [psychokinetic] powers is achieved only by the group members directing their thoughts to the same end. This is borne out by the varied ways in which "Philip's" raps respond to questions. [...] [I]f the group

remains divided as to what the "right" answer should be, then the rap is feeble.  
(Owen 1974, p.2)

While in *The Stone Tape* the passage between territories was essentially affective and pre-representational – as a gradual change of the reverberant dynamics of the rooms – here the territory is founded on a discursive, narrative and representational centre: the fictional story of a ghost, told, shared and performed for a whole year by a group of emotionally attuned people. This filtering process involves, at the same time, psychological and material dynamics. In fact, the Philip group is perfectly aware that such attunement to Philip's historical and aesthetical context is a way to amplify willingness and suggestion, necessary components for the performative enactment of the séance. This is a necessary step to put the process in motion. Similarly to a roleplaying game, narratives, representations and language frame a portion of territory contiguous but temporarily separated from the everyday one. And within this transitory, discursively-produced reterritorialisation, subjects can perform a séance by affecting and being affected by different intensities, embodied feelings that defy linguistic categorisations and even challenge a human-centred approach towards agency. In other words: agencies as ghosts, and a performative group space as a temporary haunted space.

### **Drawing the circle of the séance**

The 'centre' of the territory functions as resonant frequency which the participants must tune into, in order to direct their actions towards a performativity that creates the conditions for the sensation of communication with the Philip agency to emerge. The elements and objects that constitute the centre of the territory – the mutual agreement on Philip, the music and images of his times, the emotional bond between the members, and so on – are the structural points that would allow for the discursive framing of the territory. They are therefore the resonant frequencies the members have to be attuned to, the opening of a communication channel, of a dark medium whose intra-action with would produce the atmosphere of the eerie. This process of attuning to the resonant frequency corresponding to the second component of the territorialising refrain, the act of "[drawing] a circle around that uncertain and fragile centre" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, p.311), the actual creation of the territory via the definition of its boundaries. In

the case of the Philip Experiment, then, the question is how the group performatively constructed such boundaries as an expression and an enactment of Philip, the centre itself.

For Bennett, enchantment is born from “a precarious concatenation, it requires a delicate balance of forces, a set of fortuitous circumstances, and some practice to develop the somatic habits conducive to it” (Bennett, 2001, p.104). This consideration is particularly relevant in the process of the Philip experiment. As will be seen, in fact, the experiment can be modelled into a series of interconnected, repetitional processes which all display a fundamentally cyclical and rhythmical quality happening at a specific frequency. They are oscillatory dynamics of charge and release, accumulation and dissipation: from the weekly cycle of gatherings to the periodical oscillation of emotional energy of the group members; to the control management of the excitement within the session; to the musical rhythmical punctuation of the séance; to the circular arrangement of the structure of the communication.

The imagery of Philip informs each of such cycles, their repetitive occurrence, their timings. It defines the rules of the interactions and ultimately how the felt dimension of the séance must be experienced. Each of these circular processes are here analytically modelled as a resonator which once excited by the correct oscillatory energy enters almost in a state of self-oscillation. This is inspired by the three wavebands in Henriques’ model, “both reinforcing the affective impact of the last one, as well as building an affective expectation for the next” (Henriques, 2010, p.64), thus contributing to the energy necessary for the functioning of the whole experiment. When every part is set in motion at the correct resonant frequency and at the correct amplitude the experiment succeeds in constructing the temporary haunted territory which creates the conditions for the agency of Philip to be experienced. This is the core of the Tuner in the Philip Experiment, a multi-band attunement which needs to be carefully finetuned to specific frequencies, in order to make the signals of spirit communication coming from the Antenna pass through, and thus to let the paranormal experience emerge.

#### *Resonator 01: the weekly cycle of séance sessions*

The regularity of the weekly gatherings, articulating the experiment in the everyday lives of the participants, is a cyclic organisation which defines a temporary but recurrent space-time for Philip to be imagined, narrated, to grow and eventually to come into existence. It is clear how it is thanks to this periodical, repetitive dynamic that the experiment itself could happen in the first place. This slow, seven days-long cycle is the resonance frequency of the first resonator. Once oscillating, it materially creates the basic conditions for the experiment to take place: it is thanks to the regularity of the sessions that the group constructed a collective imagery of Philip, that they created such a strong rapport between them. At each iteration, moreover, the participants re-instantiate and re-enact the story and character of Philip, cyclically reinforcing their mental image of the ghost and at the same time their mutual relationship, their capacity to interact and intra-act together, and thus their collective, constructive agency.

### *Resonator 02: the tension-release oscillation between sessions*

In their writings, the Philip group often mention how the magnitude of the experienced paranormal phenomena was not constant but would rather change cyclically, with periods of strong activity followed by a phase of scarcity, and back. This is directly related to what the participants call the “tension” between each other, which is continuously oscillating between rising and dissipation:

The phenomena are continuing and changing. From time to time when the group is in a particularly tranquil state, after a period of much activity the phenomena appear to diminish. [...] [T]hen a further period of activity follows. (Owen and Sparrow, 1976, p.96)

For the members, this oscillation is a necessary component to the experiment, a source of psychokinetic energy similar to the one believed to produce poltergeist phenomena (Owen and Sparrow, 1976, p.95). Philip, in fact, seems to feed on this periodical charging and releasing of tension. It is postulated that this energy must be carefully controlled, and a correct amount of tension must be maintained: only in this case, the group is in the ideal psychical state to generate Philip.

During a period of little or no phenomena produced, the lack of results builds up tension between the members, thus creating the necessary energy to generate physical phenomena; but after the phenomena reappear the group tends to grow confidence and to relax, putting less effort in the experiment, in a decrease of tension which therefore dampens the phenomena, and so on cyclically. This tension resembles the emotional energy (Collins, 2005) of interaction ritual theory, which “is experienced as a feel that is carried from interaction to interaction, increasing when we engage in successful interaction ritual and depleting when rituals fail or when we go for too long without engaging in ritual activity” (Summers-Effler, 2006, p.138). While the first resonator is providing the physical conditions for the process – the participants must gather regularly to the séance, which must happen at a specific time and space – the second resonator has a psychological and emotional foundation, an oscillation of the collective mood of the group, the interpersonal focus towards the project and each participant’s emotional involvement. This resonator must be carefully tuned to be *in phase* with the first one, so that the meetings happen during the moments where the collective energy is at the right level, to ensure a successful development of the experiment.

### *Resonator 03: circular structure of the séance*

While the first two resonators displayed wavelengths unfolding throughout multiple sessions, those now under analysis happen within a single séance. The next resonator is related to the rotatory, circular dynamics that structure the session itself. In fact, most of the activities performed during an experimental séance happened circularly:

A typical session went something like this: The group entered the room, greeted each other, and sat around the table. In turn, each would say hello to Philip. Each member usually got a reply (Owen and Sparrow, 1976, p.31)

The experimenters would usually “[group] themselves in a tight circle, with the table in the middle” (Owen and Sparrow, 1976, p.58), a spatial arrangement inherited from the traditional modes of the Victorian séances, when the Spiritualist groups themselves were called ‘circles’. The interest on the circularity of the séance is something that recurs throughout the psychical research of the nineteenth century, with the notable

example of the study conducted by the French researcher De Gasparin, in which he describes the séance as a sort of electrical *circuit*, in which the closed circle between the participants facilitates the creation, passage and amplification of an etheric 'rotatory fluid' (De Gasparin, 1857). The form of the circuit – producing an oscillatory, repetitive passage of energy or information – is strictly related to the concept of resonance, as the speed of the circular motion is directly influenced by the material and structural configuration of the system. As said, the story of Philip and the collective agreement on its traits, character and appearance function as the fulcrum around which the territory can be drawn. Its barycentric role within the séance territory even assumes a spatial connotation when the group physically gathers together sitting *around* a table: "They would sit in a circle [...] In the middle of the circle they would put the picture of Philip" (Owen and Sparrow, 1976, p.17).

This circular arrangement of the participants has a fundamental role to create the conditions for that close bodily proximity and intimate synchronisation which is crucial for the feeling of Philip's agency. Interaction ritual theory states that a successful ritual needs "two or more people who are physically close enough to become entrained in each other's actions" (Summers-Effler, 2006, p.138); in the Philip experiment, the circular arrangement around the table and the close proximity of the bodies is necessary not only for the amplification of the mutual emotional excitement but also for the physical harmonisation of the movements that provoke the micro oscillations of the table. Second, the participants "must share a mutual awareness in order for the ritual potential in such proximity to be realized" (Summers-Effler, 2006, p.138). And third, there must also be a common focus of attention and a shared emotional mood: these conditions remind the mutual rapport that the Philip group so often remark as fundamental component for the success of their experiment.

When these conditions are met, the result is a "focused, intense, rhythmic interaction" (Summer-effler, 2006, p.135), in which the "participants will begin to move in synch with each other, either in physically obvious ways or through micro-coordination below the level of conscious awareness" (Summer-effler, 2006, p.138). Anthropologist Durkheim highlighted how the interaction of a successfully performed ritual creates a "sort of electricity" (Durkheim, 2008, p.217) and Bennett too, in a different context,



describes the sensation of enchantment as a “mobilizing rush as if an electric charge had coursed through space to you” (Bennett, 2001, p.104).

It seems, therefore, that a creation, amplification and transmission of an energy which behaves akin to electrical current is a widely used metaphor to describe the affective, physical connection that the ritual construct between the participants. Once again, the electrical metaphor demonstrates the fundamental resonant nature of the processes here described. Electric current is generated when the mechanism is synchronised – thus operating in resonant behaviour of band-pass filtering, of tuning – and therefore capable of amplifying micro-fluctuations of movement, action and affective relationalities. In a radio receiver, it is only through the resonant connection between the carrier of the incoming signal and the tuner circuit that the radiowaves can be transformed into modulated electrical oscillations *circulating* within the circuit, and thus capable of being detected and amplified.

#### *Resonator 4: the tension-release cycles within a single session*

The emotional energy, the ‘tension’ described above acts a sort of current which circulate throughout the members when they gather together, physically connecting their bodies in circle. The feedback loop that is thus created amplifies such energy, creating cycles of excitement that grow during the session. But how is this emotional energy managed, controlled and depleted within a single session? What happens is an oscillation of ‘tension’, similar (but faster) to that previously seen, which has to be carefully controlled in its cyclical processes of accumulation and release. It punctuates the structure of the session, and it directs and catalyses the group energy that was transmitted from the previous, slower, resonators. The group therefore structures the different activities they perform – asking questions to Philip, chatting with each other, singing and dancing – to control the amount of energy generated, thus ensuring the highest strength of the communication:

it was felt that for good and continuous results the best procedure was to intersperse the questionings with songs, jokes, and conversation. If the questioning became too intense [...] the raps became more feeble, diminishing at times to more of a “feeling” of vibration; [...] It was discovered that the tension

of continual, uninterrupted questioning definitely has an inhibiting effect upon the rapping. (Owen and Sparrow, 1976, p.31)

The process of territorialisation as defined by the theory of the refrain involves the organisation of otherwise chaotic affective forces, unformed “speeds and slownesses, movements and rests” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, p.267). When the group gather together in the space and in the moment of the session (first resonator), when they approach the session with the correct amount of tension (second resonator), when they amplify this tension by making it *circulate* within the performed séance (third resonator), and when they manage to control and keep the tension/energy at the right level (fourth resonator), the physical phenomena are at their peak. When every component of the process resonates in tune with the imagery of Philip and the collective affects of the group “a new circuit of intensities forms between material bodies” (Bennett, 2001, p.104). Each of the resonators described above feeds the fine-tuned energy back into the system in an amplifying process, in which:

Every emotion expressed resonates without interference in consciousness that are wide open to external impressions, each one echoing the others. The initial impulse is thereby amplified each time it is echoed, like an avalanche that grows as it goes along. (Durkheim, 2008, p.217)

With the fifth resonator, the frequency band reaches a musical timing scale: in the experiment, the way the emotional energy is controlled, organised and focused towards the agency of Philip is by means of the punctuating function of musical rhythm.

#### *Resonator 5: musical rhythms in the séance*

When all the processes outlined above are set in motion at the correct frequency, the séance becomes, at times, a loud and noisy stage in which singings, laughs and jokes alternate with raps, noises and table movements. As will be highlighted below, similarly to the emergence of the ghost in *The Stone Tape* here too the noise serves as primary source from which the eerie phenomena arise. Jokes, laughs and loud movements are not only the products of the energy produced by the group, but also the sources of the energy necessary to ‘charge’ Philip, an affective energy that must however be controlled and organised:

The table “sulked” for a while, not moving or doing anything. [...] The group persisted with their singing. As the song became more spontaneous the table started to keep time by bouncing up and down, shaking, and at times knocks were heard, keeping time with the beat. As the song went on, the table became very active and moved very fast. There was some fear that it would break up altogether, as the legs could be heard creaking. (Owen and Sparrow, 1976, p.59)

The use of rhythm in rituals is well documented (Jasen, 2016; Yioutsos, 2019). The important aspect here is the role of rhythm, as performed by the participants, to organise the tension of the group, their energy, making their focus on Philip expressive. The process of territorialisation, Deleuze and Guattari highlight, “is an act of rhythm that has become expressive”, when the affective vectors within the borders “cease to be directional, becoming dimensional instead, when they cease to be functional to become expressive. There is a territory when the rhythm has expressiveness” (1988, p.315). It is by this act of rhythm that the collective energy of the group condenses around the imaginary Philip: Philip *expresses itself* by beating time with the rhythm of the group’s songs. This is indeed a magical act of creation, and Bennett rightly remarks how music, rhythm, and in particular the incantatory power of chant, has a constitutive role in enchantment: “[t]o “en-chant”: to surround with song or incantation; hence, to cast a spell with sounds to make fall under the sway of a magical refrain, to carry away on a sonorous stream” (Bennett, 2001, p.6).

This approach to the experiment as a series of resonators is indebted from Henriques “propagation model” (Henriques, 2011, p.xxiii) described in the Methodology chapter, which models a series of waveformed ‘sounding’ processes distributed throughout a material-discursive frequency spectrum. In the case of the present study, however, the processes are less conceptualised as active ‘oscillators’ in themselves, but rather – as resonators – the engineering of the conditions for a process to potentially occur. A radio tuning circuit, in fact, embeds in its own design the potentiality of a resonance to be produced *if* and *when* a signal tuned to the correct frequency arrives at the circuit’s input. In a similar way, the structure of the experiment is made of a series of potential events which, once actualised, set the whole experimental process at work. The group do not actively produce a ghost – as they initially hoped for – but they create the conditions for a communication. In the terminology of my radio model: they do not

generate a signal, but through a correctly tuned filtering, they open up a channel of communication, the potentiality for a signal to be received and, through the Detector, to be interpreted. Moreover, these resonating processes have also been analysed with the help of interaction ritual theory, for which “ritual is a metaphor for interaction” (Haussman, Jonason and Summers-Effler, 2011, p.32). If, in fact, a ritual is defined as “a mechanism of mutually focused emotion and attention producing a momentarily shared reality” (Collins, 2004, p.7) then the Philip experiment could be considered (structurally) a form of ritual “[offering] a processual theory of meaning creation” (Haussman, Jonason and Summers-Effler, 2011, p.32).

### **The séance as a temporary haunted territory**

In the previous section, the process of the Philip experiment was dissected and explored in its intertwined resonant components. What is, then, the result of this process? When everything is put in motion correctly, each resonator contributes to the refraining dynamics of tracing the territorial borders around the discursive centre of Philip. What is constructed is a fragile ritual space, where the séance can be performed and its eerie agencies experienced. This territory is temporarily separated from the everyday space, albeit still physically existing in an ordinary living room. The separation happens through a process of bordering that is discursively traced by the circular movement of each of the resonators analysed above: together, they define the time and the space of the session, its structure, its pivotal moments. They organise when the phenomena could emerge and how. Each of these boundary-making circular repetitions are of discursive origin: the application of the traditional methodology of the Victorian séance, the rhythm of Philip’s times songs, the scientific-like weekly gatherings, the conversational, semiotic back and forth of questions and rap responses. Each one of these circular, cyclical processes defines the discursive and performative boundaries of the territory of the séance. Barad explains how boundaries are “necessary for making meaning” and have “real material consequences” (Barad, 1996, p.182). In her agential realist framework, the boundary is determined by the apparatus set up through which the interaction happens.

This process resonates with the construction of the sacred space as formulated by Eliade: an experience of the sacred, a *hierophany* constructs a centre which operates

a break in the homogeneity of reality and constitutes a new, different and revelatory territory: the experience of the sacred “reveals the fixed point, the central axis for all future orientations. [...] The manifestation of the sacred ontologically founds the world.” (Eliade, 1957, p.21). However, in the context of the Philip Experiment – and more generally of contemporary forms of secularised occult practices – a dual opposition between sacred and profane worlds should be addressed as a more porous, dynamic relationship. In particular, such division can be observed as a continuously renegotiated performative practice of space, by focusing on the “labour involved in the division or dissolving of the sacred and the profane” (Holloway, 2003, p.1963). For Holloway, in this sense, “these spiritual practices effect a sacred space in the everyday and thus sustain a division between the sacred and profane, they also take the everyday itself as sacred. By revealing spiritual practices of the profane, the division begins to dissolve completely into an enchanted everyday” (Holloway, 2003, p.1963).

Contemporary occult practices thus establish particular territorial assemblages “in and of the everyday” (Holloway, 2003, p.1963), whose borders are not fixed and predetermined but instead in continuous becoming. In the context of the Philip experiment, the limits of the territory of the séance space are porous and everchanging, existing only transitorily and temporarily, during the time the cyclical processes seen above are in motion. When the session is finished, the haunted territory disappears and Philip with it, the room turns back into an ordinary living room and a table rapping and tilting is once again an impossibility, a transgressive rupture of the laws of matter as much as of the mind. As already highlighted, the Tuner process is not one of active production of meaning, but the apparatus of experimentation that opens up a channel of communication: you need to turn on the radio and tune it to the right carrier frequency, to be able to receive a message. This message is however not assured by the sole act of tuning, although without tuning it would be impossible to receive any message.

When however everything is performed correctly, and the ritual engine is set in motion at the correct frequency, the participants find themselves in an affective territory which, just like the haunted storage room of *The Stone Tape*, is *sonic* – made of noises and raps – and *sonorous* – existing in cycles, producing recursive feedback and generating rhythms. As the group’s methodology is based on Victorian spiritualism the temporary territory that is created is discursively tuned to the rules and the affordances of the

traditional séance spaces: spaces which, through the incursion of the spectral, are characterised by “the disruption or dislocation of normalized configurations and affordances of materiality, embodiment and space” (Holloway and Kneale, 2008, p.303). By creating a séance territory, they assume that ontological transgressions such as raps without source and table movements are allowed to happen during the session, and that these events can be charged with intelligent agency and intentionality.

Moreover, because the temporary haunted territory is constructed through a particular performative apparatus which is discursively fine-tuned to Philip, every time the refrain process is set in motion, the *same* Philip emerges and communicates. In other words, the same resonant frequencies produce the same communication channels, just like in a radio set: the transmission of the same ghost. This is due to the role that the design of the apparatus has in the Philip experiment. It is therefore through the recursive relationalities allowed by the particular Philip Experiment’s apparatus – the series of resonant processes analysed above – that “the boundaries and properties of the components of phenomena become determinate and that particular concepts (that is, particular material articulations of the world) become meaningful” (Barad, 1996, p.156), such as the table’s spectral raps and movements. The following section will explore the effects of being in this spectral territory, and how, within it, natural noises become charged with spectral meaning.

### **The eerie through vibratory and sonic phenomena**

Up to this point, the analysis has been focused on the description of the process to create the conditions for the eerie, for the setting up of the temporary field of interaction that is the experiment’s session. Now, the analysis will delve into what forms of phenomena, relationships and events were happening within such ritual space, according to the members’ writings. Moreover, this section will trace the phenomenological process that is described by the Philip group, one that – similarly to the process of the apparition described in *The Stone Tape* – involves a gradual progression from the eerie to the weird (Fisher, 2017).

Philip is an agency that emerges from relational processes and intra-actions permitted and defined by the discursive boundaries of the performative séance territory. Within

these discursive borders the relational events happening inside are however entirely affective, embodied, pre-representational: the table moving, tilting, tapping in time, and then stopping, changing direction, trembling. What are experienced are vibrations, movements, sensuous intensities of ‘feeling and be felt’: a “coordinated conjunction” of “affective arrangements” (Slaby, Mülhoff and Wüshner, 2019, p.33). The reflective writings of the Philip group trace a clear development of the nature and interactive means of the physical phenomena connected with Philip’s communication, whose imbuelement with agency and intentionality follows a similar process observed in the previous chapter with the representation of haunting in *The Stone Tape*. At first, a subtle sensation of vibration – something at the edge of the perceptual and the internal feeling – introduces the potential presence of an invisible agency operating through the medium of the table. These peripheral feelings then progressively amplify to reach the auditory perception, sonic events which are however still considered as potentially natural in origin. Once the sitters together register such perceptual phenomena, the sounds are imbued with intentionality and communicative agency, through interactive dynamics that the séance establishes between the sitters and the material arrangements of the room and the table.

The sensation of the eerie then emerges, amplifying the perception of the presence of Philip until the appearance of the weird – in the form of the table moving and tilting autonomously –an absolute transgression that makes the sitters believe they are acting within a supernatural territory. This process is here presented as a linear, rising progression only for analytical purposes, as the different phases it is composed of are in reality more akin to extreme poles of a continuous oscillation, every time reconfiguring the modes of interactions and the affective-discursive modulations within the Philip group. In this sense, therefore, the different categories of phenomena described by the group will be here analysed in sequence, with a particular focus on the relational, mediated and embodied dynamics they are caused by and at the same time they seem to generate. This will help tracing the process by which the sensation of the eerie emerges within the Toronto sessions, from sonic and vibratory events, within the temporary haunted space of the Philip experiment. Below, each ‘phase’ of perceptual phenomena will be analysed in detail: from ambiguous feelings of vibration to audible raps, to rationally-defying table tilting, until the emergence of the ultimate *weird* phenomenon: the construction of Philip as a collective, performative body.

The following sections will address a further aspect of the Tuner that will function as a bridge to the Detector: after the actual tuning apparatus has been defined, it is now time to analyse the types and modes of physical phenomena that are produced through its intra-actions. In other words, after defining the structure of the temporary ritual space, the Tuner will here focus on the affective intensities, the movements and the events that, according to the writings of the Philip group, happened within it. These phenomena should be intended as the elements captured by the Antenna that pass through the Tuner because resonating with the material-discursive apparatus set up by the Philip group. They are the specific phenomena that their Spiritualism-inspired methodology of experimentation allows: the vibrations, raps and table movements traditionally associated with spirit communication.

### *Subtle noises and vibrations*

As mentioned earlier, the first phenomena registered by the Philip group happened shortly after the adoption of the Spiritualist-inspired methodology read in Barcheldor's papers:

One evening, during the third or fourth new session, the group felt a vibration within the table top, somewhat like a knock or rap. It is correct to say "felt" rather than "heard," because the group was making a degree of noise at the moment so that the unexpected action within the table took them completely by surprise. (Owen and Sparrow, 1976, p.26)

The first appearance of the phenomena in the experiment is marked by a subtle sensation described as a feeling of vibration coming from within the table. In an energetic, noisy environment, what *resembles* a noise coming from within the table is *felt* by the participants: as happened with *The Stone Tape's* footsteps, spectral noises emerge from natural, physical and even human-made sonic environments. While they could normally be considered natural noises, these vibratory events, happening in the temporary haunting of the séance, assume a completely different connotation, and they are even affectively felt as having an 'aliveness' that produce in the participants an "uncanny sensation" (Owen and Sparrow, 1976, p.31):



When Philip was there – even if there was no movement or rapping, the table had a feeling of aliveness, perhaps of vibration, which seemed quite different from its feel under normal circumstances. (Owen and Sparrow, 1976, p.59)

As said, these vibratory events, which precede and prepare for the raps and the table movements – make the table *feel* different, and this feeling is the feeling of an agency behind the vibrations. This sensation produces an uncanny confusion between animate and inanimate, and between human and non-human:

Often the table would creak and groan, as if something was attempting to wrench it apart. Creaking and groaning often preceded the raps or table movements, and the sitters came to regard this as an indication of the build-up of some energy or force. There would be an indication of movement within the table top, and the group felt somehow that the table had come alive. There was also a definite difference between *the feel* of the table top when phenomena were about to happen and on the occasions when nothing was happening. (Owen and Sparrow, 1976, p.52)

This is the sensation of the eerie, the question on whether there is an agency at work, something which is felt affectively. However, these vibrations already have *in nuce* a communicative and relational dimension. The table beginning to creak and groan, in fact, is the hint of the opening of a communication channel, the clue that the table is potentially acting as a medium for the interaction between agencies, some human – the members of the séance – some of unknown nature – the questioned agency of Philip. In the context of the radio analogy recurring in this research, once the receiver is tuned to the right channel, the background noise that emerges from the loudspeaker is not yet a message, but rather the opening of the potentiality of communication, the potential that a message could be received and could be sent. After this first vibratory phenomenon, which is almost submerged in the general noisy environment of the session, individual raps begin to be clearly heard, as definite auditory events:

As the sitting proceeded other raps came, as if someone had struck the table a light blow. These knocks or raps became louder and louder until there was no doubt but that they were *heard* by everyone in the group. (Owen and Sparrow, 1976, p.26)

### Raps and knocks

After the communication channel is opened, a message is thus transmitted. The raps gradually separate from the background noise of the session, they begin to assume a more defined morphology, they become self-confined sound events. When the phenomena are recognised by members *as noises* – as actual, external physical phenomena – this new awareness immediately amplifies the eerie question: if sounds are perceived, *some-thing* must be producing them, and because the context and the timings of their happening seems to obey some form of intentionality, this ‘something’ must be either a member of the group or *some-one* else. When the raps first appeared, in fact, “there was a tendency for the members to question each other about pushing, even if only involuntarily” (Owen and Sparrow, 1976, p.27).

The role of these raps is fundamental to comprehend the dynamics of the eerie in the Philip experiment. A noise, in fact, is never just a noise but already a medium carrying information: it is “also a message, a bit of information producing panic: an interruption, a corruption, a rupture of information” (Serres, 2013, p.4). This immediately brings to the mind the most classical of the McLuhanian aphorisms, and even a completely a-signifying noise is itself at the same time medium and message: as soundwave, noise exists as perturbation of the air pressure, but its happening opens the potentiality for communication, thus already carrying the message for another perturbation, that of the taken for granted rules of everyday reality, here undermined by the irruption of the eerie. It could be said that Philip, as an eerie agency behind raps and knocks, *is* noise, just as in *The Stone Tape* the ghost is ontologically made of reverb. This noise, however, is not to be intended as sound object – thus relevant for its spectromorphology (Smalley, 1997) or its referentiality to specific physical sources but as a relational event: “[n]oise is an essentially relational concept” (Novak and Sakakeeny, 2015, p.126) and “the condition from which anything can become manifest” (Serres, 2013, p.4).

Philip emerges from the noise that the interaction between the members of the group produces during the session: it is almost a by-product of such performative interactions, a parasitical interference in the natural, deterministic sonic environment of the session. The group make noise, they move, the whole situation is energetic and chaotic. In such context all sorts of sounds are likely to be produced: some of these noises, while still

retaining their 'natural' quality, become charged with the *eerie*, making the sitters produce questions about the potential agency behind them. The point is that it is precisely in such noisy environment that the 'ghost' of Philip could find ideal conditions to emerge, and to emerge exactly from noise, feeding itself with the interactive energy produced by the performative actions of the participants. This, it can be remembered, happens also in the case of *The Stone Tape*: there, the ghost emerged from the reverberating footsteps of the characters. And as the storage room was the most suitable place for its appearance, so the aim of the Philip group's methodology is to create the perfect environment for a rapping ghost to emerge: a performative space which needs to be noisy and chaotic. In other words, as *The Stone Tape*'s storage room's impulse response already contains in potential the apparition, the methodology of the Philip Experiment creates the conditions for a noisy ghost which, once again, it is more a configuration of (affective) relationalities than an objective and objectual entity in and of itself.

### Table Movements

After the group got accustomed to the raps and the possibility to communicate with the *eerie* agency of the table, a new type of phenomena begins:

After some four weeks of sittings when raps were produced, one night, suddenly, the table started to move, and it moved around the room in random fashion. [...] It would [force] most of the sitters to relinquish their contact, and then shoot across the room at great speed, so that at times it was difficult to keep up with it. (Owen and Sparrow, 1974, p.10)

The table thus begins to move as if possessing an aliveness of its own. With this, the experiment shifts from the ambiguous question of the *eerie*, to manifest the paranormal agency as a full presence: it is a visual, objective *weird* phenomenon which is perceived as wrong, which should not exist (Fisher, 2017, p.15). However, this visually-centred phenomenon too maintains the strong sonic (and musical) connotations that have been recurrent throughout the experiment. At times, in fact, the movements of the table become a sort of frenetic dance, with the table-Philip contributing to the excitement and the amusement of the session by tilting to the beat of the songs sung or played by the group:

The group persisted with their singing. As the song became more spontaneous the table started to keep time by bouncing up and down, shaking, and at times knocks were heard, keeping time with the beat. (Owen and Sparrow, 1976, p.59)

What these recollections demonstrate is the deep, embodied relationships that are established between the sitters through the medium of the table and – through the process of imbuing the table itself with an idea of eerie agency and intentional autonomous movement – between the sitters and the table itself. There is therefore a bodily resonance at work, a synchronisation which makes all the participants sing, move, dance at once, and as one: a weird body existing only for the time and space of the session, that gradually grows from the initial sensations of vibrations, amplifying to the point of the weird (Fisher, 2017), only to then immediately dissipate at the session's ending.

### **The weirding of Philip's collective body**

In the 16mm film *Philip: the Imaginary Ghost* produced by the Toronto group and aired in 1974 on the CBC television channel as part of the *Very Special People* programme (Folklore Podcast, 2020) it is possible to see the modus operandi of the group, the setting for their experiments, and some of the actual phenomena claimed to happen during the sessions. The participants are gathered in circle around a tiny table, with their palms touching its surface. At first, the table begins to tilt subtly, then progressively stronger and stronger, until it almost turns upside down. Together with the motion, the noise produced grows louder, and the table seems behaving autonomously.

However, the group is aware that the movement of the participants themselves has a strong role in this process: the table is known to be moved by the sitters as much as their hands are themselves pushed and pulled by the table. Batcheldor himself in fact warns about this recursive feedback of 'affect and be affected':

it is of course well known to psychical researchers that under such conditions tables can tilt and dance in a manner surprising to the uninitiated, but that such movements can be caused by the combined unconscious muscular action of the sitters (Batcheldor, 1966, p.340)

What happens is a process of synchronisation, involving multiple active generators of oscillatory energy which progressively attune to a common frequency. It is the vibratory interaction happening between the micro-muscular, unconscious movement of each participant, that gradually makes the group harmonise their movement and producing a smooth and regular tilting of the table. The table itself here mediates each participant's muscular activation via proprioceptive feedback (Dean, 2013), a mechanism by which humans tend to adjust repetitive movements to match the resonant frequency of moving systems they are mechanically coupled with (in this case, the oscillating table).

This synchronisation is facilitated by the musical rhythm of the songs that the members sing, in rhythmical entrainment “whereby two rhythmic processes interact with each other in such a way that they adjust towards and eventually ‘lock in’ to a common phase and/or periodicity.” (Clayton et al., 2005, p.2). These processes are recognised by Collins as “necessary ingredients” (Collins, 2004, p.79) in interaction rituals:

individuals who get into the flow of interaction have made a series of adjustments that bring their rhythms together; hence they can “keep the beat” with what their partner is doing by anticipation, rather than by reaction. (Collins, 2004, p.77)

Thanks to the rhythmic entrainment here described, the *weird* phenomenon emerges: the human subjects and the table, moving at such a rhythmical synchrony, progressively lose their individuality, catalysing each singular contribution in a cohesive collective body, a “collective subject” (Henriques, 2005, p.67), a “corporeality that literally pulsates with cycles of exertion and rest” (Henriques, 2005, p.69). The group becomes an “open, fluid multiple whole” which “breaches the epidermal envelope in which individual identity is commonly considered to be sealed” (Henriques, 2005, p.69).. The individual components of this body become almost irrelevant with respect to the oscillating whole. Every-body moves and is moved, there is no way to trace back who is the cause and who is affected by the movement. The agency of each participant becomes part of a collective network of intra-actions, from which dualist separations of internal-external, or cause-effect, or self-other fail. It is purely intensive, felt.

Even just for the limited time of the session, a different, collective body is born, and this body is the body of Philip: at last, the apparition of Philip, the realisation of the group's original aim. As Connor has pointed out, in the traditional Victorian séance the aim was not so much about bringing spectral entities into reality, but "[f]irst of all, [...] the séance is the scene for the creation and exploration of a new kind of collective bodily experience" (Connor, 1999, p.207). The performance of the séance is able to produce "sensory intensification", and "[w]ith this intensification came a sense of the enlargement of the body's forms and limits" thus creating "a condition in which [...] thoughts were on the point of becoming things" (Connor, 1999, p.209). Viewed under this light, the weird phenomenon of Philip is not the table tipping per se, but rather the body which emerges from a fine-tuned resonance of multiple, harmonically-organised processes. The result is a form of autopoietic system, a self-oscillating interactive process in which the causal chain governing every singular contribution is dissolved in a recursive network of 'affect and be affected'. The result, as in every emergent phenomenon, is more than the sum of its parts, and like the mysterious shapes created by the starling murmuration, the eerie body of 'Philip the artificial ghost' is born, only to last for the time of a session.

## **5.4 Detector**

The Tuner section explored the emergence of the sensation of the eerie via affective concatenations, a "distributed agency in the sense of a performative sequence" (Slaby et al., 2019, p.33). The aim was to understand how human, non-human and fictional agencies emerged and transformed in the time and space of the temporary ritual space of the experiment, with bodies interacting with each other through the medium of sound vibrations. The Detector searches for interpretative processes, territorialisations: the framing of the paranormal experience within semiotic structures. It is the process of decrypting of the affective intensities emerged at the level of the Tuner, the experience of which is not yet fully understood, and still sits in a conflictual relationship with the taken-for-granted rules of ordinary reality. In other words, to take the unformed noises and vibrations happening and make them into messages, into signals. More specifically,

the focus of this section will be to understand the processes by which the noises, raps and table movements became expressions of the character and personality of the fictional Philip, thus tracing the resonant relationalities between the affective and bodily dynamics of the experiment with its discursive, symbolic and narrative dimensions. Moreover, the section will highlight the ways the Toronto group struggled to resolve the problems of dealing with a fictional-but-physical agency in a rational, pseudo-scientific framework.

From the Tuner analysis it appears clear that Philip is characterised by a fundamentally atmospheric nature: it is born from a resonant interaction between subjectivity and objectivity, and between affective dynamics and discursive-narrative imageries. In *Psychical Research*, the attempt at resolving the paradoxical oscillation of the paranormal between the mental and the material – one of the recurring topic of this research – can be found as early as in the classic studies on séances conducted by French researcher De Gasparin:

with a phenomenon at once moral and physical, in which the intention of the members of the chain plays a preponderating part, without excluding the influence of material agents, it is impossible to avoid facts apparently contradictory. (De Gasparin, 1857, p.81)

This configuration, which defies linear causalities and clear onto-epistemological separations, is highly problematic from the scientific-rationalist perspective that the Toronto group advocates. In particular, the physical nature of the sonic phenomena is source of ambiguity, as “[t]he question of mass hallucination or group hypnosis, or of the noise of the raps being a subjective impression, cannot be maintained” (Owen and Sparrow, 1976, p.91). The paradoxical situation of a resonance between a mental construction and objective external events is therefore addressed by the group as a problem of the nature of the unknown force that would explain such dark mediation “not between two points in a single reality, but between two realities” (Thacker, 2013, p.131), two different and usually opposite ontological domains:

[W]e come now to the core of the problem – what is the nature of the physical force at work? How does it happen? How can a group-thought, however strong and motivated, transform itself into a physical force that can be heard and

recorded? It is a new force previously unknown to science? Or a variation of an old force? Can it be brought under conscious control? If so, can it be harnessed in any way? (Owen and Sparrow, 1976, p.89)

What can be seen here is the main epistemological position posed by Psychical Research, which was so clearly represented in the experimental efforts of the scientists in *The Stone Tape*: to understand the physical dynamics behind the phenomena, to then be able to reproduce them, measure them and, ultimately, control them. Like in *The Stone Tape*, when the phenomena are acknowledged as physical, the logical development is that there must be *some kind of* force at work, connecting the brain with the external material reality, and exciting the natural resonances of the vibrating objects:

It is a force of some kind, we have some idea of what it can do, we can measure it to some degree [...]; it can be projected over a distance, without contact; it is related to the psychological — basically emotional — make-up of the person or persons operating it, and that's as far as we can go at present. (Owen, 1977, p.4)

Therefore, the source of such force is searched in the possibility of the brain to produce electrical processes that can extend as external electromagnetic fields:

We must assume that it comes from the brain, as it is apparently a result of brain activity. We know that the brain cells continually generate an electrical force which can be measured and charted. We think of group-thought energy as a variation of, or perhaps an extension of, brain-cell energy." (Owen and Sparrow, 1976, p.152)

This hypothesis is in line with the traditional positions of Psychical Research which, from its heydays in late nineteenth century, attempted at explaining paranormal phenomena by adopting resonance-based rational explanations. In many early cases, in fact, it is possible to read how the séance functions thanks to the establishment of a “magnetic rapport” between the participants and the medium, if a “certain condition of the atmosphere in which to produce the manifestations” (De Gasparin, 1857, p.426) has been met. Electricity, magnetism and electromagnetic waves are extremely common metaphors adopted from the beginning of psychical research, when the science of electricity was still in its early days:



If my brain, acting like a Leyden jar, emits and directs a fluid current along my nerves, if this fluid is also emitted by the other members of the chain, it is evident that our combined action will soon form a sort of electric battery.” (De Gasparin, 1857, p.426)

The transmission of force necessary to mentally influence physical matter is of vibratory origin, and the mind acts as “dynamogen” which “[condenses] the waves, and [helps] to produce a sort of fugitive being more or less material” (Flammarion, 1907, p.443). Once again radio metaphors are at the core of the psychical paradigm, postulating a parallel between the process of wireless radio reception and of telepathy in séance settings (Findlay, 1931), in which the central condition must be an actual correct tuning between the bodies of each participant, each “emanating vibrations of a different degree” (Findlay, 1931, p.67).

### **From raps to Philip**

After adopting Batcheldor’s methodology, the group immediately began to question the agency behind the vibrations, raps and movements that started to regularly occur during their sessions. It is in this context that the raps, from being just noises, become to be interpreted as messages sent by Philip:

They were not quite sure how to deal with this strange twist to their experiment [...]. While this speculation was going on aloud about the cause of the table rappings, Dorothy exclaimed, “I wonder if by chance Philip is doing this?” Immediately there came a very loud rap from the table top – so Philip had come, though in a different form that which we had expected. (Owen and Sparrow, 1976, p.27)

The question that group member Dorothy asks is in reality the proposition for an answer to the eerie ‘question of agency’: the agency exists, it is not questionable anymore, and it is Philip’s. And thus, with that confirmation rap, ‘Philip the imaginary ghost’ is no more an *image*, something that should *appear* out of nowhere in the middle of the room, as a form of material secretion of the members’ psychical imagination. Philip, here, is born of an interaction, the resonance between the performance of a fictional ghost and a physical event, whose apparent synchronisation with the question

posed by the experimenter makes the event resemble a communicative act. Philip is not the *apparition* of a ghost but the name given to a pure, agential relationality.

But how did Philip evolve, during the experiment, from an eerie question of agency to an intelligence behind raps and table tilting, to eventually the qualification of this agency as the ghost of a Sixteenth century Englishman? As said in the Tuner, Philip was an agency which existed only during the time and the space of the session, that is, while all the performative resonant-cyclical processes were set in motion and correctly attuned, thus constructing in the group's living room a temporary haunted territory. Philip, therefore, is not a 'thing' or a person, but a "node, a knot, and a conglomerate [...] of agencies" (Latour, 2006, p.44); the "object of a performative definition" which "vanishes when it is no longer performed" (Latour, 2006, p.37).

Akin to the storage room's wide reverberation in *The Stone Tape*, within the affective and atmospheric territory of the séance, Philip has agency because it makes others "do things" (Latour, 2006, p.107): it influences the participants movements, it makes them sing songs, ask questions, and so on. The comment "I wonder if by chance Philip is *doing* this" (Owen and Sparrow, 1976, p.27, italic mine) proposed by the group member demonstrates a step further into this gradual coagulation of the eerie agencies of the session around the character of Philip. The events that happen during the séance, therefore, become actions produced by an *actor*, which is always "provided in the account with some flesh and features that make them have some form or shape, no matter how vague" (Latour, 2006, p.53): the collective body composed of every sitter entangled together through the medium of the table, a body that "transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry" (Latour, 2006, p.39).

In this transformation of Philip as an actor actively participating in the séance, it becomes necessary to territorialise the raps into linguistic communication. This is a fundamental passage as, to achieve the objectives of the experiment, the Philip group must demonstrate not only the existence of a spectral agency in their séances, but that this agency *is* Philip, the ghost that they have invented. Therefore, they have to be able to demonstrate that the agency behind the raps and table movements can intelligently respond according to Philip's biography and personality constructed by the group. The

Detector process in the Philip Experiment is thus a process of imbuing agency with specific identity. It is a process that creates a linear causality between a fictional invention and a physical phenomenon, a connection that happens through the medium of sound and resonance. In line with the traditional Spiritualism-inspired methodology, they establish the most classical of the spirit-communication modes: “one rap meant yes, two raps meant no” (Owen and Sparrow, 1976, p.28), as the spiritual telegraph (Brown, 1970; Cox, 2003b) already explored in the history of spirit raps outlined in the Antenna.

This drive towards communication is a fundamental difference between the Philip group and their inspiration, the research by Batchelder and Brookes-Smith: while the two inspirators never conceived the phenomena as caused by an autonomous agency, Philip is not only a manifestation of psychokinetic energy but an actor with a biography, a personality and desires that are known and agreed between every member of the group. Therefore, the group do not only produce phenomena: they communicate, bidirectionally, with Philip at both a rational and an emotional level. Through this rudimentary but effective yes-no communication language they conducted years of séances, conversating with Philip, asking *him* questions about his life, habits, desires, thus contributing to expand the story of Philip and the depth of his personality (Owen and Sparrow, 1976, p.33):

“Were you a Tory, Philip?” Al asked.

(Rap) “Yes.”

“Of course he was,” Dorothy said “He was a follower of the king, wasn’t he?”

“He could have been a Catholic, too,” Iris observed. “Were you a Catholic, Philip?”

(Rap, rap) “No”

“Oh, I wonder what he was? Were you a Protestant?”

Slight hesitant knockings, followed by scratchings.

“Were you an Anglo-Catholic?” asked Bernice.

(Rap) “Yes.” (Owen and Sparrow, 1976, p.35)

However, the personality of Philip did not emerge only through semiotic conversations. The previous quote shows the “slight, hesitant knocking” and “scratching” that Philip respond with when unsure of the right answer. The noise-based dialogue in fact

developed into an interaction involving non-verbal communication, with the table producing different sound 'gestures' to express different emotions and feelings:

Although the yes-no code had been established by the sitters, the table seemed at times to develop a subtle "personality" of its own. For instance, if Philip did not know the answer to a question, there would be several hesitant knocks. If a remark was made which reflected on his wife Dorothea, the most extraordinary scratching sounds were heard from apparently underneath the table top. When a particularly good joke was told, there would be a series of loud raps, giving a kind of rolling effect, almost as if the table were laughing (Owen and Sparrow, 1976, p.32)

Specific morphologies of rap sounds thus became distinctive traits of Philip, and the group "became quickly accustomed to recognizing the different types of rap, and should a knuckle or finger tap accidentally, they would immediately say, "That wasn't Philip." (Owen and Sparrow, 1976, p.32). This non-verbal communication imbued Philip not only with a personality but with an identity, habits, gestures, almost physical characteristics that differentiates him from other ghosts. When the Philip group at a late stage begun to collaborate with other offshoot groups constituted at the Toronto Society for Psychical Research – putting Philip in communication with other artificial ghosts, such as Lilith and Venus – the sitters were allegedly able to recognise the sound of Philip in the conversations:

[T]he *character* of the knocks from Venus were different from Philip's. Just as one morse-code sender can recognize another by the character of his sending, so was there a difference between Venus and Philip. We had noticed this when the earlier group had worked with the Lilith character — Lilith's knocks were much gentler and more feminine than Philip's. (Owen, 1977, p.4)

Similarly to certain biometric research where the sound of footsteps is analysed to individuate the person by their unique walk (Diapoulis et al., 2018), so specific *spectromorphologies* of the raps – the spectral timbre of the sound events and how it changes over time – become imprints of the spirit communicator's identity. These 'metadata' allegedly obtainable from the non-verbal communication of the imaginary ghost display the perpetuation of gendered stereotypes of femininity as physically characterised by gentleness, care and softness. This essentialist and sexist connotation, it has been explored above, runs through the whole Philip Experiment,

being in fact at the very foundation of Philip's fictional biography, where the character of a stereotypical seductive witch was the narrative device employed to trigger the believability of Philip as a ghost. Here, such discriminatory connotations assume an embodied, material form, with the sensuous dimension of the raps conveying gendered stereotypes.

### **Making sense of Philip**

As introduced in the Antenna section, one of the most common and long-lasting problems encountered throughout the history of psychical research is the attempt at solving the paradoxical existence of the paranormal as a resonance between an internal disposition and external, objective events. To resolve this problematic situation, the approach adopted by the scientifically-inspired Philip group is to reterritorialise the paradoxical resonance between the mental and the material by experimentally assessing the nature of the physical phenomena experienced, and to correlate them with other physical and physiological measurements of known origin:

We can devise instruments for measuring the forces making the noises or moving the table. This would give us an idea of the actual strength of the force or energy produced by the group. The physiological functions of the people taking part in the experiment can also be measured, both before and during the experiment, to ascertain whether there are any physiological changes during the production of the phenomena. Brain waves can be measured, heartbeats and respiration rates recorded, and skin responses can be monitored." (Owen and Sparrow, 1976, p.159)

The attempt is to order the eerie agencies within a traceable causal chain, by finding correlations between physiological/biometric data and the Philip phenomena. This, however, is never a transparent and objective operation, and the sole act of inserting a measuring apparatus in the system of the séance diametrically changes the network of agencies that produce the experience of the eerie. To measure Philip is to take a snapshot of a process which is ontologically defined by a constant becoming, being at the same time based on resonances and behaving itself as resonance-based 'machine'. As Barad claims, "[k]nowledge is always a view from somewhere" (Barad, 1996, p.180). Therefore, "experimenting and theorising are dynamic practices that play

a constitutive role in the production of objects and subjects and matter and meaning” (Barad, 2007, p.56). An apparatus of measurement, “enacts a cut delineating the object from the agencies of observation” (Barad, 2007, p.131). Moreover, “the agential cut enact a causal structure among components of a phenomenon in the marking of the “measuring agencies” (“effect”) by the “measured object” (“cause”)” (Barad, 2007, p.131). The effect of this agential cut is the definition of what is material and what is mental, what is objectively external and what subjectively internal, and the causal relationships involved in the phenomena of the Philip séances.

Similarly to what seen in *The Stone Tape*, the Toronto group therefore sets up a recording apparatus to capture the Philip raps. The aim is to analyse the phenomena acoustically to demonstrate their spectromorphological uniqueness – thus, confirming their psychokinetic origin – and to search for acoustic hints on how they are physically produced in the materiality of the table. They therefore record on magnetic tape a series of phenomena during some sessions, together with control raps, produced by the participants by tapping their fingers on the surface of the table. The resulting recordings are then visually printed on a strip-chart recorder, whose waveform representation is then used to compare the control raps with the Philip raps (fig.8).

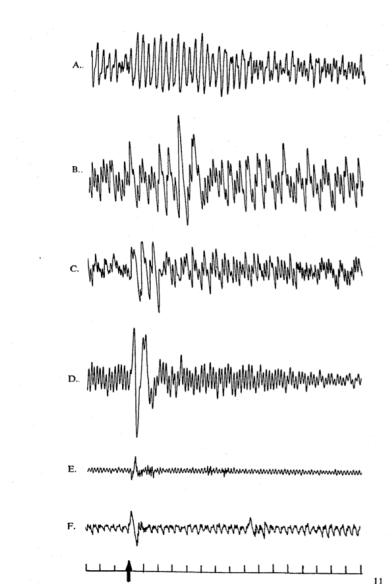


Figure 8 - Plotting of Philip raps (Whitton, 1976, p.11).

The analysis allegedly confirms the spectromorphological difference between the two sets of recordings, and the Philip raps seem to “have an acoustic envelope not

possessed by normally produced percussion raps, and characterized by rapid decay” (Owen, 1976, p.4). Moreover:

in respect of the shape of the acoustic envelope, the maximum amplitude of the sound vibrations occurs nearer the end of the rap sound-burst. This is in distinct contrast to the envelope of the control rap. (Whitton, 1976, p.8)

From these experimental findings, the researchers build hypotheses on the physical processes involved in the production of the raps:

Perhaps each individual rap builds up from a small vibration into a loud noise. Possibly each rap starts with the movement or vibration of molecules within the table top until the disturbance is strong enough to produce noise.” (Owen and Sparrow, 1976, p.92)

From a technical perspective, the recording mode adopted is quite inaccurate, probably undermining the reliability of the findings. The noises, in fact, “were recorded using a Philips N4450 recorder with its microphone attached to the mid-point of the “table” surface” (Whitton, 1976, p.7). To position a dynamic microphone touching the surface which is the source of the sounds would easily produce a strong proximity effect, “the tendency of directional microphones to increase their LF (low frequency) output at close operating distances ” (Eargle, 2005, p.17), thus highly affecting the equalisation of the recording. Moreover, the machine used to print the waveform is characterised by a bandwidth that further enhances the inaccuracies of the microphonic capture:

The Brush strip-chart recorder was capable of reproducing frequencies from D . C . up to only 200 Hz; however, the form and duration of the acoustic envelope were identical to those displayed on the storage oscilloscope. The absence of the higher sound frequencies and harmonics did not alter the overall sound envelope form or duration. (Whitton, 1976, p.8)

The last sentence is certainly erroneous in the context of the analysis conducted by the Toronto group: to filter out frequencies above 200hz in a recording already so strongly equalised towards the low-end of the spectrum has exactly the effect to cutting

away the sharp transients such as the attack of the sound, that will therefore appear much 'slower', which is indeed one of the claimed features of the 'Philip raps'.

However, the analysis here conducted does not aim to assess the validity and reliability of the experimental methodology described in the paper above. What is more relevant, instead, is what the design of the experimental apparatus of measurement reveals about the way the Philip group conceptualised and represented the experiment and the paranormal events connected to it. As the material-discursive apparatuses of measurements are, by following Barad once again, "particular physical arrangements that give meaning to certain concepts to the exclusion of others" (Barad, 2007, p.164), the choice of a microphone *touching* the surface of the table demonstrates the primacy of the 'felt' dimension of raps, which are never solely auditory events but always entangled with the sense of touch and their sub-auditory vibratory dimension.

This experimental search for touch, for a vibratory coupling between the table and the recording medium indicates the importance that the interactive dynamics intrinsic in sound phenomena have for the Philip group. Clearly, for them was more important to express this felt sensation of vibration than to record sounds objects. In other words, to capture, store and render as evidence not so much the sound itself – as ontologically 'different' – but the different feeling that they experienced when Philip was *in the table*. The question of agency of the eerie is thus expressed through touch, an intimate sensorium that becomes the interface for a boundary-making process, a distinction between the participants' and Philip's agencies.

However, the agential cut actuated by inserting in the system a separate, external measuring apparatus betrays the resonant onto-epistemology of the Philip experiment. In fact, by recording the raps – and even more by printing the waveforms, thus visually *representing* them – the researchers objectified something that, until that moment, had always existed as relational, interactive dynamics. The waves of the raps, which in the context of their happening are not "things per se; they are disturbances (which cannot be localized to a point) that propagate in a medium" (Barad, 2007, p.93), become here schizophonically (Schafer, 1993) separated from the time and space of their happening, transducing a transitory disturbance into a fixed state magnetically imprinted in the ferrite material of the audio tape. With this agential cut, therefore, they turn the sound



events connected to Philip into sound *objects*. And furthermore, with a printed representation of the waveforms, they operate a *visual*-centred analysis of such sound objects: the difference of the Philip raps, at first something felt vaguely at the touch of the table, is now acknowledged visually, by a different *shape* of the sound envelope (fig.9).

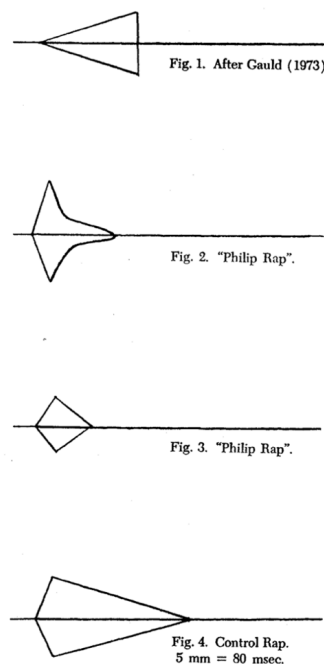


Figure 9 – Graphic representation of Philip raps (Whitton, 1975, p.23).

Any shift from sound event to sound object have for Di Scipio strong, ideological consequences:

In its manner of working, the sound object turns off the relational and contextual meaning [...]. It prevents a becoming-aware of sound as the fragile trace of agencies belonging to the actual place and time. Saying that the sound object has an ideological status amounts to saying that [...] it implements a historically-determined representation, and makes things work accordingly across the society. (Di Scipio, 2014, p.12)

In the case of the Toronto group, to objectify, to state the primacy of vision over listening and feeling – superimposing that “retinal logic of separation” (Barbanti, 2020, p.44, translation mine) to the multisensory interactivity that was at the foundation of the eerie agency of Philip – has indeed an ideological status. As hearing and touch always

had a crucial importance in Spiritualism, from Victorian heydays where the dim-light of the gatherings “encouraged liaisons between hearing and the proximity senses, of touch, odour and taste” (Connor, 1999, p.208), to reconstitute the primacy of visual representations is a strong statement of the scientific, rationalist approach of the group, fiercely rejecting any connection with Spiritualism, although fully adopting its methodologies.

The move operated by the group, therefore, marks a reterritorialisation of the phenomena they themselves triggered into an established, deterministic way of knowing and understanding of a human world which is founded on a hegemony of the visual. Seeing and analysing visual rendering of the phenomena previously *felt* as part of a collective, performative resonant body at the same time declares the objective success of the experiment and frees its observers from the awkwardness of their bodily involvement with the birth of Philip. In other words, it is the final move towards the separation from the sensuous dynamics of the séance, capable as it is to challenge the human territory with the emergence of atmospheric, non-human agencies in-between the physical and the psychical. This happens precisely through the ear and the skin as they are part of a relational field of shifting kinetic energies that continuously map onto and into each other. Instead, the group reconstitutes the centralised and rationalised position of the human, as the centre of a measurable and knowable world: a world where things exist because they can be seen and reproduced.

What is, to conclude, the final remark of the Philip experiment? With their experimental analysis of the physical phenomena that the group associate with the agency of their fictional ghost, the ultimate aim is to rationalise the paranormal, to reterritorialise the experience of the eerie back into the territory of the everyday. The psychokinetic hypothesis, stating that “the production of physical phenomena by a group not specially selected for psychic talent is a repeatable experiment which can be successfully performed by any sufficiently integrated and dedicated circle of sitters” (Owen and Sparrow, 1974, p.6), is believed by the group to be a common denominator, a unifying theory for the claims of paranormal experiences in the past. Towards the end of the *Conjuring Up Philip* book, Owen and Sparrow mention some accounts of poltergeistery and haunting previously studied by the Toronto group, analysing them through the lenses of the ‘findings’ of the Philip experiment:

Because of the experience gained during the experiment, we would now probably deal with such a haunting in a different manner. We believe now that the team probably tuned in telepathically to the occupants of the house, and probably created an apparition [...]. (Owen and Sparrow, 1976, p.121)

An apparitional phenomenon thus becomes the consequence of a 'telepathic tuning'. Similarly to the literature on psychical research mentioned in the previous chapter, while the rationalist, scientific approach completely rejects the 'processual resonance' – the relational, communicative process of the eerie – the concept of resonance reappears as physical hypothesis.

This Detector analysis highlighted how sound is the discursive tool employed in the Philip Experiment to make sense of a paradoxical ontology, one that seems to seamlessly oscillate between the material and the psychological. The procedure applied by the group however introduces a reductionist move, in which the interpretation of the phenomena shifts from a relational dimension of resonance towards a fixed, objective representation, with the performative process of the Philip Experiment and its problematic sonic phenomenologies reduced to the visual rendering of waveforms plotted on paper. To summarise the whole Radio model in the context of the case study, a historical approach to spirit communication filtered through parapsychology (Antenna), brings to the establishment of a complex performative practice of deterritorialisation (Tuner), involving resonance-based physical interactions and resonance-like group dynamics. When this process is set in motion by attuning to the correct rhythmical and cyclical repetitions, the sensation of the eerie can emerge, as the question of agency about the affective intensities emerging from the experimental session. Such embodied feelings are then territorialised in the Detector through a shared semiotic system of communication, based on questions and rap responses. The resonant ontology of these sonic phenomena, then, is then collapsed into a visual representation which transforms a relationship into a waveform, a feeling of the eerie into an objective evidence. And it will be such dialectic between embodied experience and evidential reality to be one of the central themes of the next case study.

## 6 *Hellier*

### 6.1 Introduction

With this chapter, the research concludes the tripartite attempt on mapping the spectrum of practices and discourses which define contemporary notions of paranormal experiences. The case study here taken into examination is *Hellier*, an ongoing independent documentary series composed to this day of two seasons both released on YouTube in 2019. *Hellier* will prove to be a relevant case study for its popularity among the paranormal community online – which considers the series as one of the most innovative and authentic works in the field – as well as for its peculiar structure, which allows for a deep understanding of the gradual development of the practices, processes and discourses of the paranormal. This chapter conceptually continues the analysis carried out throughout the previous ones, further progressing the study about the performative dimension, the relationship with space and the connection between subjective experience and collective paranormal lore, once again through a focus on the processes of resonance involved in the case.

With respect to the conceptualisation of hauntings, *The Stone Tape* chapter conceived the haunted space as a physical – and physically resonating – space, and the Philip Experiment chapter explored the construction of temporary hauntings as performative spaces. This chapter, instead, will highlight haunting as a collective cultural space, emerging from a material-discursive resonance between on-site experience and a lore in-the-making. Moreover, while *The Stone Tape* dealt with notions of haunting as a solitary experience and the Philip Experiment with the paranormal emerging from particular group interactions, *Hellier* will draw from both modes while providing the opportunity to explore how paranormal experiences collectively circulate, in particular through the engagement with online platforms and social media. Once again, sound and resonance will be the principal areas of investigation, as well as the epistemological tools that allow to trace the aforementioned processes, imageries and discourses, demonstrating how the contemporary paranormal experience can be analysed through the stages that compose the Radio Sorcery model.

*Hellier* is an independent documentary series directed by Karl Pfeiffer and produced by Planet Weird, a media company owned by Greg and Dana Newkirk: paranormal investigators, online content creators and curators of the 'Traveling Museum of the Paranormal & the Occult'. To this day, *Hellier* is composed of two seasons, both aired in 2019 on YouTube and Amazon Prime Video. The documentary is centred around a group of American paranormal researchers – the producers Greg and Dana Newkirk, Karl Pfeiffer (also director), Connor J. Randall, with Tyler Strand joining in the second season – investigating a case of reported entities roaming near abandoned mines and disturbing the locals of the town of Hellier, Pike County, in eastern Kentucky. The investigation begins with Greg Newkirk receiving mysterious e-mails from an individual describing first-hand unexplainable experiences and the constant state of fear that this was producing in his family, which eventually forced them to leave the town of Hellier. The man describes goblin-like creatures coming from the abandoned mines in the family's property to disturb their sleep with scratches, noises, tappings on the window and other mischievous acts. The man begs Newkirk for help, and even shares low-resolution pictures which allegedly portray blurred night-time images of the goblins themselves. After a first exchange, the e-mail communication is suddenly interrupted and the man disappears, leaving Newkirk unable to pinpoint the precise location of the alleged events, nor to learn more of the man's identity.

Throughout its fifteen episodes, the series follows the investigators researching on these alleged creatures, trying to find the man who first contacted them, investigating on any possible paranormal lore of the place and, at the same time, developing a peculiar investigative approach which involves on-site explorations, ritualised experiments and an almost psychogeographical interaction with place. However, the series soon greatly expands its onto-epistemological horizon, leading the investigators beyond the geographical area of Pike County, as well as the strict focus on the alleged goblins as well, to connect their case with some of the most notorious instances of the American Fortean lore, such as the so-called Shaver Mystery (Beckley, 1985), the Mothman mythos (Keel, 1975; Barker, 1970) or the alleged encounters between Woodrow Derenberger and the alien being called Indrid Cold (Derenberger, 1971).

*Hellier* proves to be a relevant case study for multiple reasons. First, it displays a novel approach to the methodologies of paranormal investigation, while at the same time remediating and combining some of the most important historical approaches to the field. Its structure and the thoroughly way the series narrates the practices and the developments of the five investigators' explorations provide a rare opportunity to trace the processes of the paranormal experience as represented in contemporary Fortean discourse. Moreover, the ways in which the entertainment documentary form narrativises feelings, experiences and perceptions at the edge between the subjective and the objective allows to highlight how the paranormal is born from material and discursive resonances between fact and fiction, documentation and entertainment, story and experience. Furthermore, the active social media presence of the series' creators, and their constant interaction with the online community allows for an in-depth analysis of the cultural impact of *Hellier* and its contribution to collective occultural discourse.

*Hellier* allows us to analyse the process of production of paranormal lore, a process of charging places with experiences and stories of haunting emerging from peripheral sensations and marginal feelings of affective atmosphere. Sonic interactions and listening ecologies are crucial for the understanding of the experience of the paranormal in the case of *Hellier*: the vast majority of the phenomena which are interpreted as paranormal are in fact sonic-based. Moreover, in *Hellier* sound is the principal medium of interaction employed during the experiments, often with the use of audio technologies. These will be at the centre of the analysis of the Tuning section: how the series represents the use of sonic practices in situ to connect with the emerging supernatural lore. Before this, however, the Antenna section will provide the fundamental contextualisation necessary to understand the multitude of intertextual connections existing between *Hellier* and the broader occultural discourse around paranormal investigations. These will prove fundamental to understand how the investigators construct a complex set of practices to be performed on site – in the Tuner section – and then how these are framed within a discourse on the paranormal based on the practice of synchronicity that spreads online to arrive at assuming some characteristics of a countercultural community – in the Detector.

## 6.2 Antenna

*Hellier* broadly pertains to the genre of documentaries usually termed ‘paranormal investigations’: TV and streaming entertainment shows that represent and document paranormal experts engaging in a vast range of discourses, techniques and practices aimed at experiencing, communicating with – and, often, finding evidence of – inexplicable phenomena which are conceived as supernatural in origin. Paranormal investigation shows are often strongly focused on the exploration of a site considered haunted or a place where alleged paranormal phenomena have happened. The beginning of such practices can be traced back to psychical research and to Victorian spiritualism at the end of the nineteenth century (Eaton, 2020, p.7). It corresponds to the “beginnings of a systematic examination of supernatural phenomenon, driven by the natural sciences” (Mayer, 2016, p.363).

While persisting throughout the twentieth century, such practices have seen a sharp rise in interest from the beginning of the 2000s (Hill, 2017), alongside with other “modern forms of enchantment” (Holloway 2010, p.618) such as dark tourism and ghost hunting. These are considered by some scholars (Carlton, 1987) as new forms of spiritual practices, which distance themselves from institutionalised religious systems, towards a “shift toward an individualized modes of belief and practice” (Eaton, 2015, p.390). Others see this renewed popularity as “undoubtedly influenced by a concurrent supernatural boom in popular culture” (Ironsides, 2018, p.102), highlighting the role of the popular British reality television programme *Most Haunted* and its successors. However, while “modern media have transformed ghost hunting from the occasional pursuit of an aristocratic and leisured class [...] into a popular form of mass entertainment, [...] ghost hunting is not merely a form of cosplay, nor is it, to coin a phrase, “media-tripping” (reenacting television and movie plotlines for personal enjoyment or empowerment)” (Ruickbie, 2019, p.101), paranormal investigation recently assumes instead the connotations of an “independent subculture” (Ruickbie, 2019, p.102).

Although *Hellier* surely shares some similarities with the ‘traditional’ paranormal investigation subculture and the TV shows that popularised it, its approaches, its

methodology and ultimately its aims display some relevant peculiarities. The typical methodologies of investigation displayed in programmes such as *Most Haunted*, *The House In Between* or the series *The Secret of Skinwalker Ranch*, to name a few, are strongly evidence-based, focused on ensuring “as “scientific” an investigation into the purported haunted site as possible” (Koven, 2007, p.187). They are characterised by the wide use of electronic sensor and audiovisual technological equipment to gather measurable evidence and to ‘scientifically’ assess the reality of the claimed phenomena. Scientific instrumentation and technology are widely used as means to detect “unspecific changes in local environmental variables [...]. The use of technical equipment both expands the human perceptive capabilities, and also helps to conserve the physical traces and to give them the status of a greater objectivity.” (Mayer, 2016, p.366).

While heavily utilising multiple technologies and media devices, the *Hellier* investigation fundamentally shifts the aim from the recording of hard evidence of alleged supernatural phenomena to the use of technology within occultural practices to catalyse and amplify a sensation of the eerie rising from dynamics mostly involving peripheral perceptions, subtle sensations and feelings. Bebergal, in this sense, states that “technology can be used to create supernatural resonances as well as to act as a medium for imagining we are communicating with other realms. [...] technology provides a literal mechanism for altering our perceptions or for demanding that we perceive something in a new way” (Bebergal, 2022, p.341). The use of technology in *Hellier* – and by extension the very conceptualisation of audio and sonic relationships – is precisely directed towards a communication traveling across different relationalities, which welcomes without contradiction a seamless oscillation between the perceived and the imagined. The Antenna will now trace some relevant discursive channels that are important in order to understand the occultural milieu within which *Hellier* arises, which it develops and, to some extent that will be described in the Detector, it challenges.

### ***Hellier* in the context of Fortean research**

One of the most relevant aspects of the investigation carried out in *Hellier* is its peculiar, ‘entity-agnostic’ approach to the paranormal. The series in fact begins with a strong



ufological focus, only to greatly expand in later episodes to encompass multiple instances of the occultural milieu, such as ghost hunting, chaos magick, ceremonial occultism, wicca, Thelema, conspiracies, bigfoot lore, psychical research, parapsychology, divination and even ancient Greek mythology. Even the paranormal entities at the centre of the *Hellier* story, the so-called goblins (as the man was initially describing them in his emails), seem to cut across the whole American paranormal lore: their physical appearance shares similarities with many extraterrestrial accounts, their behaviour reminds the classical poltergeist activity – tapping the windows, producing unexplained noises – and the evidence produced in the original e-mails – photos of three-toed footprints and blurred, low-resolution pictures – directly connects with the tropes of cryptozoology. For the investigators in *Hellier* these heterogeneous components are not in conflict with each other. Instead, they consider the necessity for an interdisciplinary approach to the study of the paranormal, wishing for a more organic dialogue between the different fields, between which “there’s a lot of weird crossovers” (*Hellier*, 2019).

This unifying approach to the paranormal - recurring throughout *Hellier* – is openly inspired by the so-called “new ufology” (Keel, 1975, p.872), the occultural milieu emerging in America from the mid-sixties to the late seventies around a renewed interest in UFO lore after that general period of lack of interest on the matter, usually referred as the “Dark Age” of American ufology (Pellegrino, 2021). New Ufology is defined by the works of writers and Fortean researchers such as Grey Barker (1970), John Fuller (1966) and, most relevantly, John Keel and Jacques Vallée. These two last authors, in particular, will be fundamental to frame the epistemological approach proposed in *Hellier*: Vallée’s *Passport to Magonia* (1969), Keel’s *Operation Trojan Horse* (1970) and, in particular, his *The Mothman Prophecies* (1975), are not only important instances of modern Fortean literature, but are effectively the epistemic foundations from which the *Hellier* case stems and develops. Every episode is often constellated by references, quotes and reflections on texts ranging from paranormal accounts to academic writings, to newspaper articles and local archives. The hermeneutical research in *Hellier* shapes and directs both the methodology of investigation and the very conceptualisation of the paranormal: the connection between the *Hellier*’s case and the historiography of paranormal research is not just a source of knowledge potentially helping the case’s investigation, but it is a constitutive

drive that, as it will become clear in the Detector section, becomes the aim of the whole *Hellier* project itself. Therefore, it is here necessary to contextualise such approaches within the broader discourse that the investigators in the series frequently refer to as influence and inspiration. This section will trace some of the main discursive elements characterising the New Ufology of the seventies, as these will prove to be the conceptual foundation of the whole investigation represented in *Hellier*.

One of the most important and long-lasting contributions of the aforementioned authors to the modern discourse of the paranormal is surely their attempt at constructing a unifying theory of Fortean phenomena, as unexplained phenomena seem to be “so widespread, so diversified, and so sporadic yet so persistent that separating and studying any single element is not only a waste of time but will also automatically lead to the development of belief” (Keel, 1975, p.11). In this sense, Keel and Vallée were among the first to propose the so-called ‘Interdimensional Hypothesis’ of paranormal phenomena: UFOs, cryptids, ghosts, fairies and every other instance of the Fortean lore are not to be considered extraterrestrial in origin nor super-natural, but rather terrestrial agencies inhabiting different ontological planes of reality coexisting with the one accessible by the human sensorium. This hypothesis also offers a unifying theory of the encounter with high strangeness also from a diachronic point of view. In *Passport to Magonia* (1969), in fact, Vallée states that all supernatural encounters recorded throughout the millennia – whether ghosts, aliens, fairies, demons and even Marian apparitions – are different representations that the ‘Phenomenon’ assumed at different stages of human history, adapting its transitory physical appearance, its behaviour, and its modes of interaction to fit the cultural and scientific episteme of the time.

The shape, form and imagery of paranormal entities therefore becomes a semiotic territorialisation of otherwise pre-representational emanations of the Phenomenon. It is a resonant connection between the subjective dimension of the experience and external, perceptual events, or, in other words, between cultural representations and the affective intensities at the source of most paranormal experiences. In contrast with the ufological episteme of the fifties, Keel and Vallée pose great importance on the psychological dimension of the supernatural, without however rejecting its physical element:

I abandoned the extraterrestrial hypothesis in 1967 when my own field investigations disclosed an astonishing overlap between psychic phenomena and UFOs [...] The objects and apparitions [...] may not even exist as permanent constructions of matter. It is more likely that we see what we want to see and interpret such visions according to our contemporary beliefs. (Keel, 1970, p.272)

Similarly, in *UFOs: The Psychic Solution*, Vallée declares that “the things we call unidentified flying objects are neither objects nor flying” and that “the key to an understanding of the phenomenon lies in the psychic effects it produces (or the psychic awareness it makes possible) in its observers” (Vallée, 1975, p.38).

The experiencer then assumes a central role, becoming effectively the subject of the Fortean research. Paranormal phenomena become the emergent phenomena of processes which share, without contradiction, characteristics of matter and of symbolic language, metaphors and stories. The hard, material evidence of the supernatural, when claimed, becomes a transitory phenomenon, a temporary condensation of some form of intentional agency around culturally established forms and shapes, to then disappear, dissolve or fall apart in a way resembling more a narrative device than the effect of material causal relations. This approach is highly influential in the context of *Hellier*, where the investigators frequently engage with concepts existing at a quasi-objective (Böhme, 2016) level, as catalysts of affective atmospheres. These are specific resonations between the internal – expectations, willingness, suggestion – and the external – contingency, chance events, peripheral perceptions:

I'm more interested and fascinated with how human consciousness plays a part in the paranormal [...] I'm starting to [...] understand that the final frontier of paranormal research is not the external, it's the internal, and how that affects the external. (Newkirk in Talking Weird, 2020)

As seen in *The Stone Tape* and in the Philip Experiment, in *Hellier* too this complex relationship between the internal and the external is one of the principal preoccupations moving the whole experience and its epistemological questions.

Another aspect which is connected to this relationship between subjectivity and external reality is how *Hellier* – as a representative point in this research's investigation of post-1960s occulture – so strongly embodies the resonances between experience and imagination – as well as practice and representation – which are here all fused together in an expanded conceptualisation of the paranormal. In this sense, *Hellier* is indebted by the eighties and nineties' occultural discourse (Hine, 1997; Morrison, 2003) that established magical practices by seamlessly incorporating science, esotericism, pop culture and myth, in a continuum of meaning-making between narrative invention and real-world experimentation. Moreover, as will be analysed in depth during the Detector section, *Hellier* is openly inspired by horror films, TV entertainment shows, as well as the work of writers such as John Keel, whose books on the UFO phenomenon or the Mothman have always been debated as in between the revelation and the hoax. What is here important is not so much the validity of such texts but how they helped to frame *Hellier* – and I argue, contemporary occulture in general – within a representation-driven dimension of experience similar to that observed in *The Stone Tape* and the Philip Experiment, in which affective intensities and feeling of eerie atmospheres could emerge without contradiction from either embodied practices, performances or processes of narrativisation. And most of all, that such modulations tend to happen, once again, through the medium of physical *and* discursive resonances: another important influence of 1970s occulture that will be highlighted below.

### **A vibratory approach to the (super)spectrum**

The neo-Fortean approach sketched so far outlines an approach to the paranormal which is strongly characterised by non-reductionist, processual, and relational connotations, making it a relevant discursive position not only for the analysis of *Hellier* but useful to frame the broader research of this thesis. In fact, the process that Keel describes to be mediating such material-discursive movements is essentially based on concepts of resonance and vibration. The writer postulates the existence of a radiowave-like force which affects the brain of paranormal witnesses as an otherworldly form of broadcasting (Keel, 1975). Radio becomes once again the preferred discursive apparatus to make sense of and describe the mechanics of the paranormal, imagining an oscillatory energy which sits in-between the physical and

the psychical, a source of low frequency waves in direct interaction with the human brain:

In some cases, we have reason to suspect that these low-frequency waves produced a condition that generated hallucinations in the subjects. [...] These same symptoms and effects are also common in various forms of psychic and religious phenomena, indicating that all paranormal manifestations may have a common cause. This cause may be beams of electromagnetic energy on the lower frequencies. These beams are not necessarily broadcast by some technological instrument, but may be generated by some unknown force in the cosmos. This force may not be physical at all. The source may be diffuse. (Keel, 2013, p.558)

Keel thus proposes a “paraphysical hypothesis” (Keel, 1970, p.39), in which paranormal entities are considered natural but *made of* vibratory energy. The paranormal is therefore “primarily electro magnetic in origin and [...] it possesses the ability to adjust beams of electromagnetic energy to any given frequency” (Keel, 1970, p.45). Supernatural beings – UFOs, ghosts, cryptids, monsters and so on – are native of different frequency regions which are yet to be discovered by human science. Keel coins the term ‘superspectrum’ to address this extended notion of the electromagnetic spectrum:

This is a hypothetical spectrum of energies that are known to exist but that cannot be accurately measured with present-day instruments. [...] This superspectrum is the source of all paranormal manifestations from extrasensory perception (ESP) to flying saucers, little green men and tall, hairy monsters. (Keel, 1975, p.65)

These entities are normally unperceivable but, under specific mechanisms of tuning their own wavelengths, they momentarily become capable of interacting with physical matter, as it happens in the transitory apparitions of UFOs in the skies (fig.10):

Let us assume that UFOs exist at frequencies beyond visible light but that they can adjust their frequency and descend the electromagnetic spectrum just as you can turn the dial of your radio and move a variable condenser up and down the scale of radio frequencies. (Keel, 1970, p.55)

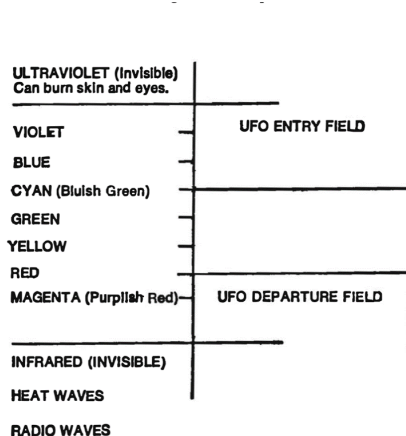


Figure 10 – Frequency bands of UFO movements (Keel, 1970, p.50)

Just as the UFOs become observable when they cross the frequency bands of visible light, they become audible when they interact with physical matter at frequencies within the auditory spectrum. These material interactions thus produce the “noises, buzzes, hums, hisses and musical bell-like sounds” (Keel, 1975, p.61) that frequently occur during UFO manifestations and which, for their mechanical-like feeling, are often confused for the sounds of mysterious engines, contributing to the erroneous idea of the UFOs as technological artifacts.

In Keel’s hypothesis the human sensory organs are tuned to specific frequency bands, and they resonate with the ‘superspectral’ beings only during the brief moments in which they cross the auditory range or the spectrum of visible light. However, for Keel, the possibility to perceive entities from the superspectrum is not only confined to the rather poor sensitivity of human ears and eyes: the brain itself is capable of different and finer tunings, as it is conceived as “a very sophisticated, little-understood receiver” (Keel, 1970, p.43). This is the case of sensitive individuals, whose ‘gift’ is interpreted as the ability to “tune to desired parts of the superspectrum selectively” (Keel, 1970, p.74). Furthermore, the human body is not the only object capable of tuning in to the superspectrum. Keel, in fact, interprets the frequent accounts of technological malfunctions during supernatural apparitions – radio interferences, cars suddenly shutting down, strange noises heard through telephone calls – as the demonstration of the entities’ resonant agency on wide portions of the electromagnetic spectrum. The tuner section below will trace how the *Hellier* group put in practice Keel’s and Vallée’s

concepts in their investigative methodology, centred around the search for resonance-like processes via resonance-based technologies.

With this presentation of a resonant theorisation of paranormal phenomena, the Antenna connects to the corresponding sections of the other case studies: the paradoxical, and ontologically problematic interaction – or intra-action – between mind and matter is explained through resonance and vibratory concepts. This will become fundamental to *Hellier*, as the analysis will highlight how the practices developed by the group of investigators in the series are profoundly informed by these vibratory conceptualisations, both from a material and a discursive point of view. There is in fact a physically resonant and a symbolic resonance-like components of the *Hellier* practice, which are mutually resonating together as well. While this was a component evidenced in every case study so far, in *Hellier* this will become particularly relevant in relation to another fundamental conceptual element that needs to be intercepted by this Antenna in order to understand the modes of the paranormal in the case study: the concept of synchronicity.

### **The concept of synchronicity**

The occultural milieu outlined so far describes a highly relational, interactive and resonant conceptualisation of the paranormal. Another fundamental concept in this sense, and one that deeply embodies the idea of a process that is understood as behaving as resonance is the one of synchronicity. Widely popular in the same period of Keel's writings and often mentioned within ufological texts, the term synchronicity was first introduced by psychologist Carl Jung in the early Fifties and then quickly becoming a foundational element of the occultural episteme of the Sixties and beyond. The concept, in fact, continues to be adopted, transformed and remediated across many fields such as psychotherapy (Hopcke, 2009), philosophy of science (Cambray, 2002; Martin and Carminati, 2009), media theory (Dennis et al., 2008), religious studies (Main, 2007), parapsychology (Palmer, 2004), self-help (Jaworski, 2011), occultism (Dukes, 2002) just to name a few. Jung originally defined synchronicity as an acausal connecting principle emerging from “the simultaneous occurrence of a certain psychic state with one or more external events which appear as meaningful

parallels to the momentary subjective state—and, in certain cases, vice versa” (Jung, 1952, p.25).

Synchronicities tend to produce situations in which “there seems to be an a priori, causally inexplicable knowledge of a situation which at the time is unknowable” (Jung, 1952, p.31). Aziz identifies four main modes by which the coincidence is rendered meaningful, in Jung’s theory. First, when there is a parallel between the objective, external event and an intrapsychic state (Aziz, 1990, p.75). Second, when the experience of coincidence is emotionally charged with the sensation of the numinous (Aziz, 1990, p.77). Third, when the significance of the synchronistic event is interpreted from a subjective point of view, as related to the experiencer’s own desire and drives (Aziz, 1990, p.80). And finally, when the synchronicity taps into a collective, “archetypical level of meaning” (Aziz, 1990, p.82).

However, Jung’s original definition remains rather mercurial, displaying contradictions in particular relatively to the role of time correspondence. But it is this very conceptual openness, together with its broad “concern with the existence of an intimate connectedness between all things, visible and invisible” (Farias and Granqvist, 2007, p.128), that contributed to the spreading of the idea of synchronicity beyond psychology. The concept, in fact, soon found particularly fertile ground within the emerging New Age movement, where synchronicity could become “part and parcel of a growing movement that privileged mystical experience, spontaneous epiphanies”, effectively blooming into a “symbiotic” relationship which “continues to support one another’s survival” (Hocoy, 2012, p.472).

The fame of the idea of synchronicity widely expanded across the occultural and countercultural milieu of the early seventies, for instance with the work of writers such as Robert Anton Wilson and the McKenna brothers (Davis, 2019). Erik Davis states that “synchronicity does not demand explicitly occult interpretations, but it certainly lends itself to them” (Davis, 2014, p.640). In fact, the concept of synchronicity can be found as a foundational component of contemporary forms of magical thinking. In particular, occultist Peter Carroll states that “the art of magic lies in contriving coincidences” (Carroll, 2010, p.30), and that “all magical paradigms partake of some



form of action at a distance, be it distance in space or time or both. [...] In magic this is called synchronicity. (Carroll, 1987, p.191).

During the early seventies, an operative approach to synchronicity became entwined with the nascent internet networking technologies, demonstrating the close connection between occultural imageries of otherworldly communication and technological media development. It is the case of the experiments conducted at the Institute for the Future of Stanford Research Institute. Computer scientist and renown Fortean ufologist Jacques Vallée – the one already encountered as one of the main personalities in the ‘new ufology’ paradigm – attempted at combining the State-funded interest on remote viewing – lead by Russell Targ and Harold Putoff (Targ and Putoff, 2005) – and the pioneering research on internet teleconferencing technologies, by conducting online real-time parapsychological experiments on clairvoyance (Vallée et al., 1976; Vallée, 1988). In these experiments, alleged sensitive individuals connected through early internet networks had to guess the physical characteristics and provenance of a series of rock samples selected by experimenters spread in different universities of the USA.

More recently, the development of internet social networking systems – as “a mechanism that encourages an ever-broadening network of speculative leaps, synchronistic links, and curious juxtapositions. (Davis, 2015, p.290) – corresponded to a spread of a synchronicity-based approach to conspiratorial thinking. The resonances between synchronicity and internet conspiracies reappeared among online cultural discourse with the recent so-called meme-war (Nagle, 2017; Dafaure, 2020), the online magical practices allegedly performed by alt-right affiliates on imageboards and social media platforms in conjunction to the 2016 Donald Trump presidential election (Lachman, 2018; Glitsos and Hall, 2019; Lobinger et al., 2020).

Synchronicity functions in *Hellier* as a core hermeneutical mechanism through which the investigators interpret the liminal, often subtle phenomena they allegedly engage with. As will be analysed in depth in the Detector, synchronicity is in *Hellier* the manifestation of the interconnectedness between all the symbols, the meanings and the ideas the investigators encounter throughout the series. This is an approach that developed in post-70s occulture (Morrison, 2003; Carroll, 1987) and is today at the centre

of online paranormal discourse. However, the focus on synchronicities in this chapter goes beyond the sole recognising of the relevance of the concept within the case study. Instead, the idea of synchronicity will prove to be a crucial element in this thesis' ongoing construction of a resonance-based theory of the paranormal from the 1970s onwards.

One of the running threads of the paranormal discourse analysed in the thesis so far is the complex – and at times contradictory – interplay between recognising the phenomenological importance of material resonances (sound and other vibrational energies) and the construction of a symbolic dimension of resonance, one that is not directly related to the presence of vibratory events in the physical domain but rather as the way the practitioners tend to express and explain their experiences. It is the case, for instance, of the formalisation of the 'stone tape theory' as involving human bodies acting as "detectors – decoders – amplifiers" (Kneale 1972), an idea that drives the characters in *The Stone Tape* to search for a physical resonance at work behind such feelings of atmospheric attunement. This was found also in the Philip Experiment, with the group's preoccupation on enhancing their collective rapport, conceived as a necessary component for the phenomena to emerge. In the Toronto experiment, in fact, the noise and sound produced during the séance was the emergent phenomenon of another resonant system, one made not of the transmission of vibratory energies but rather of a broader, performative, emotional resonance between the participants.

In these examples resonance is not just a physical phenomenon but rather an epistemological position: the paranormal experience is not only resonance-based but also conceived as *resonance-like*. In other words, the case studies demonstrate how paranormal phenomena are better understood – by experiencers and researchers alike – as *behaving* as a resonant process, as a "mechanism through which categorically related but spatially distant phenomena interact" (Sharf, 2002, p.83). It is a mechanism where subjective conditions and external events seem entangled by laws beyond the deterministic rules of material causality, and instead excited by semantic, aesthetical or emotional correspondences.

As mentioned at the beginning of the thesis, this particular dimension of the workings of the paranormal is widely found throughout the history of mysticism and esotericism,

often with the use of recurring terms such as harmony, sympathy, correspondence, rapport and attunement: all concepts that strongly connect to the idea of resonance. In this context, the idea of synchronicity should be considered as part of this conceptualisation of a symbolic resonance, of a resonance-like interpretation of a supernatural network of relationships and agencies existing between all things:

The array of magical and paranormal beliefs present in the everyday explanations of individuals involved in the New Age is illustrative of their concern with the existence of an intimate connectedness between all things, visible and invisible. Concepts such as karma or the idea of synchronicity [...] are employed in such a way as to allow the individual to establish a virtually unending network of connections. (Farias and Granqvist, 2007, p.127)

Moreover, and more importantly, the practiced concept of synchronicity in *Hellier* becomes a bridge between the physical and the symbolic resonances involved in their paranormal phenomena. All the sonic-based practices of paranormal investigations that will be analysed in the Tuner, in fact, have in *Hellier* the fundamental role of charging mundane objects, images and symbols found throughout their investigation with synchronistical meaning, as resonating poles around which the territory of the paranormal is born.

These ‘resonators’, it will be explained in the Detector, are often entirely visual from a phenomenological perspective: the multiple findings of blue-star balloons, a rusted tin can found in a cave, a particular surname recurrently noticed in the town’s streets, the wood carving of a green man, and so on. However, their meaning lies not in their appearance, but rather in a synesthetic interaction that blurs sensory dynamics and mental imaginings into an experiential whole governed by pure sensations of connection and intention. The investigators in *Hellier* interpret such events as having symbolic force, an interpretation that frames objects and occurrences not as inert data but as ‘tuning forks’ in a shared cultural field. In this sense, semiotic elements – names, images, numbers – are stripped of their conventional meanings and reconceived as affective nodes ‘resonating’ with their collective expectation and desire. For these reasons, the concept of synchronicity is in *Hellier* a form of resonance, conceived in an

extended way as a social phenomenon which “arises through a complex interplay between the affective dispositions [...] of multiple individuals and contextual factors within an affective arrangement” (Mühlhoff, 2019, p.189).

The Detector section will focus on how the concept of synchronicity in *Hellier* is not only a metaphorical suggestion but instead an integral part of their investigative methodology, a discursive process which stands as the principal mode of directing and structuring the on-site explorations and even becoming considered *the* source of paranormal phenomena. To understand such processual dynamics, however, the analysis must initially trace the modes, the methods and the relationships through which *Hellier* represents the practices and discourses to charge places, situations and events with the potential of the paranormal, through the construction of the feeling of the eerie. This, in accordance with the previous chapters, will be the main preoccupation of the next section, the Tuner of the Radio Sorcery analytical model.

### 6.3 Tuner

This section will address the ‘tuning’ component of the process of Radio Sorcery in the case study *Hellier*. As mentioned, a relevant aspect of this case resides in the ways in which *Hellier* subverts the traditional modes of paranormal investigation documentaries, by documenting the whole progression of the case, and the development of the crew’s methodology. Most of all, however, the relevance of *Hellier* stands in its lore-making character. In fact, the analysis of the cultural resonance of the series will unveil a representative case on how an everyday territory, extraneous to any paranormal meaning and narrative, becomes charged with the potentiality of the supernatural, arriving at being considered a highly discussed centre of contemporary paranormal discourse. The ‘spontaneous’ experience of the paranormal, emerging through embodied interactions with physical resonating spaces discussed in *The Stone Tape* will have a crucial role in *Hellier*, as the source of attunements with atmospheres of the eerie within everyday sonic geographies. At the same time, *Hellier* constructs its paranormal meaning via performative practices and ritualised experiments conducted on-site, which catalyse, produce and amplify the material-

discursive resonant ecologies which are at the basis of paranormal communications. In this sense, the tuning process of the Philip Experiment will prove here relevant as group practices purposefully designed to incite the emergence of a temporary haunted territory, a field of interaction where to engage with felt supernatural agencies.

At the core of the process that will be here traced there is, once again, a question on the dialectic between shifting and transformational territories: how does the ordinary everyday, with its affordances and its semiotics accorded to a rational and deterministic interpretation of reality, gets unsettled and transfigured, to become porous towards stories, imaginations, affects and to welcome the potentiality of the paranormal? How do affective, pre-representational intensities influence and resonate with emerging narratives of supernatural agencies inhabiting a place? The process of the paranormal has been interpreted, throughout this research, as the transfiguration of the ordinary territory of the everyday – rational and deterministic – through a resonance of its borders, reconfigured to welcome other agencies and intensities. As explored in the previous chapters, this sometimes happens spontaneously, sometimes deliberately and, as this chapter will highlight, induces a combination of the two modes.

The following sections will trace the ways the *Hellier* represents the ways the crew encounters, performs and enacts the sensation of the eerie (Fisher, 2017), charging the explored places and the events that characterise their case with the potentiality of the presence of supernatural agencies. As mentioned above, the focus on the sonic allows for a deeper understanding of the affective, atmospheric and non-representational aspects expressed in *Hellier*. The analysis, similarly to the previous chapters' Tuner sections, will continue to follow the theoretical concept of the refrain (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988), as the process that philosophically expresses the formation of affective-discursive territories via vibrational and resonance-based processes.

### **Finding the 'fragile centre': the encounter with the atmosphere of the eerie**

In *Hellier*, affective atmospheres and senses of place do not only serve a suggestive or narrative purpose, but they have also a constitutive role in the investigative methodology of the crew, and in their very conceptualisation of the paranormal. This

emerges strongly in the initial phases of the investigation when, during the first three episodes, the crew conducts the first exploration of the town of Hellier and its surroundings. The introductory first episode makes the viewers acquainted with the background of the case, the events that triggered the investigation and how the crew was formed. In the second episode, Greg, Dana, Connor and Karl begin the first proper exploration of the town in Kentucky.

The episode follows the crew's travel to Hellier, from the highway to the tight roads passing through the mountains of Pike County, where the town is situated. The camera shows the scenery as seen from the car, alternated with interviews to the participants reflecting on the sensations they felt during the journey. The descriptions of the area rarely mention physical features of the landscape. Instead, the investigators recurrently mention the 'vibe' felt while reaching the area, detailing the emotional and subjective feelings about a place which is described as "dead", and "in the middle of nowhere" (*Hellier*, 2019), and the sense of desolation triggered by the seemingly abandoned construction sites that punctuate the road. The narration is entirely atmospheric, focusing on unsettling impressions seemingly emerging from mysterious qualities of the place itself:

It was not a pleasant feeling. It's not a comfortable place to be. [...] I was uncomfortable, like, very apprehensive about being there, hyperaware of myself being in this environment. [There] is just a weird feeling to Hellier. (*Hellier*, 2019)

This weird feeling arises subtly and without any apparent recognisable cause. The place *feels* weird not as a consequence of unexplainable events but as a sensation arising from an unusual awareness of the participants towards their presence within the environment. This peculiar sense of place becomes a crucial part of the investigation as it marks the crossing of an invisible, non-representational threshold: the ordinary, everyday world has been left, and a new, different territory is being approached, one haunted by different and unknown potentials of 'affect and being affected'. This boundary-crossing is not rationally perceived as external or objective, but rather entirely felt as a "resonance, or interference pattern" (Massumi, 2002, p.14) of different affective intensities: "like, you drive into it and it's an overwhelming, weird vibe" (*Hellier*, 2019).

There is a recurrent use of the term ‘vibe’, to express such anomalous sensations in *Hellier*. Interestingly, vibratory metaphors of shivering and trembling assume a particular relevance in the context of the encounter with affective atmospheres. The atmosphere “involves the felt-body with consequences on the physical one [...] (‘it is hair-raising’, ‘it makes you shiver’, ‘it gives you goose bumps’, etc.)” (Griffero, 2016, p.74). For Griffero, these feelings are what connects the atmosphere with the experience of the numinous introduced by Otto (1958), a concept which is closely related to the sensation of the eerie:

A theory of the spatiality of feelings cannot but acknowledge its debt towards the theory [...] of the numinous. The *mysterium tremendum* is, in fact, the atmosphere that fluctuates in the air in a given place, without a whence and a where-to, but that arouses a ‘faint shiver’ (Griffero, 2016, p.73)

Shivers have been recurrently encountered throughout this research as an embodied subtlety, an unformed and uncharacterised feeling which corresponds to the first hint of an anomalous agency of the place itself. In *The Stone Tape*, shivers are identified by Kneale as the “premonitory chills” (Kneale, 1972) that the sensitive Jill feels before the apparition. In the context of the Philip Experiment, instead, the participants describe a sensation of vibration of the table, which introduces the ‘presence’ of Philip. Shivers are therefore intended as the first felt potential of the paranormal, described in vibratory terms. It seems that, while clearly a psycho-physiological condition, they are often described as bodily resonations to an immaterial but affective external energy. Shivers, in other words, are embodied manifestations of affective atmospheres, quasi-objects (Böhme, 2016) experienced as resonances in between the internal and the external worlds. The experience of affective atmospheres – the feeling of the “weird vibe” of the place, as they usually call it – is for the *Hellier* crew a fundamental element in their methodology of investigation. Feeling of atmospheres becomes a practice of geographical orientation outside from the borders of the everyday territory:

Greg “I think you nailed the place. It feels right”  
Greg: “What do you feel, Dana?”  
Dana: “it feels weird...it has a vibe for sure”  
Karl: “what kind of vibe?”

Dana: “like a Shangri-la. That kind of feeling. It’s a bit, like, dreamy. Like you’ve found...you’ve found a pocket” (*Hellier*, 2019)

Through these atmospheric intensities, Hellier is felt as a territory which is more than just a physical space but a field of unknown potential encounters and interactions. The ‘weird vibe’ of the place is also the first hint that Hellier could be inhabited by different – and potentially malevolent – agencies: “I felt like it didn’t, at that time, want us to be there” (*Hellier*, 2019).

There is here a clear demonstration of the “questions of agency” (Fisher, 2017, p.61) that mark the production of the sense of the eerie. Before any representation in supernatural terms, the agencies that the investigators feel remain within the realm of the affective atmosphere: an agency of the place itself, which never reveals itself objectively but that, at the same time, feels more than just a trick of the imagination, and which subtly undermines the recognisable affordances of the place. This is indeed the fundamental component of the affective atmosphere as defined by Anderson (2009), McCormack (2015) among the others highlighted in the literature review chapter. The feeling the crew describe sets the ground for the events to come: after the spontaneous encounter with the ‘weird’ atmosphere, the sense of the paranormal will then be “fostered through deliberate strategies” (Bennett, 2001, p.4), by amplifying such atmosphere until it reaches the point of self-oscillation, charging events with feeling of the paranormal.

### **Listening as atmospheric attunement**

Once arrived in Hellier, the investigators conduct a preliminary survey of the area, interrogating the locals dwelling around the gas station’s pizza shop, which appears to be the social centre of the little town. They ask about any information potentially relevant for the case, as well as any strange experience that the persons are willing to share. Disappointingly, nothing of particular relevance is revealed: the town of Hellier is indeed an ordinary place, defying any interest for paranormal research. This creates a friction with the sensations felt while approaching the place, demonstrating how the sensation of the paranormal is not emerging as an immediate irruption into the everyday world but rather a gradual process that involves practice and a specific



attitude. The second phase of the investigation thus begins, with the crew actively trying to reconnect with the eerie atmosphere initially registered.

That same afternoon the investigators reach the accommodation they rented for the night, a wooden cabin situated in the town's vicinity, surrounded by a forest. Here, after sunset, they prepare for what they define "intention setting experiments" (*Hellier*, 2019): ritualised interactions with the place, aimed at "stir[ing] up" any potential "activity" (*Hellier*, 2019) hidden in the environment. Such preparatory rituals are common practice in paranormal investigations and their performance can incorporate a wide range of methods, depending on the participants' personal belief systems and spiritual position (Eaton, 2015). In *Hellier*, most of these rituals are conducted by Dana Newkirk, who identifies herself as a practicing witch: her rituals are influenced by the traditions of natural magic and witchcraft and often involve material offerings – usually food – to spirits "elemental in nature or land-based" (*Hellier*, 2019). In general, the 'intention setting experiments' performed by the crew are focused on deepening their connection with the surrounding environments, through perceptual focus and attentive concentration. The engagement with affective atmospheres is once again central: the aim is here to attune with the place, becoming able to read its movements and resonate with them. The experiments territorialise the investigators' presence in a place they felt as different and unwelcoming, by setting their positive exploratory intentions "through the active affordance and constitutive role of matter in ordering the emergent force of the possible supernatural" (Holloway, 2010, p.624):

A deep breath, exhale. We want to send out the intention that we're here to communicate, with anything intelligent that [...] might take up residence in here, anything we might refer to as a "goblin", or maybe a "critter", a ghost, an entity. [...] It exists. [...] That word exists: contact. (*Hellier*, 2019)

In this quote from a later experiment, Greg Newkirk clearly demonstrates the series' pre-representational approach to the paranormal. The call for communication they send is not directed towards a specific supernatural entity – with fixed characteristics and defined communicative modes – but rather towards a pure experience of affective relationships with something whose nature and behaviour is not taken for granted. As a consequence of such an ontologically mobile and shapeshifting conceptualisation of

the paranormal, the fixed objectivity of the vision ends up losing its epistemological primacy: as an agency whose presence is never fully revealed, the phenomenon in *Hellier* is something that cannot be seen but is rather experienced as atmospheric attunement, emerging from a constant oscillation between subjective feelings and external events. The phenomenon is born of that oscillation, that “resonation” (Massumi, 2002, p.14) between affective intensities. It is precisely within this network of pre-representational agencies and interactions that the sonorous dimension of atmospheres assumes its crucial importance, as material but impalpable interactions, immersive and often existing in-between perception and hallucination:

We’re talking about potential Native American spirits, aliens, goblins. It’s all right in this area. And [...] we’re the only people, we can say with near certainty, tonight, listening. (*Hellier*, 2019)

At first, it would seem that Connor is here talking about a mere auditory attentiveness to the surroundings: the progressive “adaptation of the ear to a new sound environment” which “may lead to a refinement of listening, a better reception of weaker sounds and stronger attention” (Augoyard and Torgue, 2006, p.35). A listening directed towards any weird sound – a sound that “does not belong” (Fisher, 2017, p.15) – potentially occurring in the woods around the cabin. Seen this way, this perceptual condition reminds the *écouter* listening mode of Schaefferian tradition, which conceives a clear separation between listening subject and sonorous environment:

*écouter* designates a mode of listening that is securely bound to the natural attitude, where sounds are heard immediately as indices of objects and events in the world. *Écouter* situates sounds in the surrounding sonorous milieu, grasps their distance and spatial location, and identifies their source and cause on the basis of sonic characteristics. (Kane, 2014, p.27)

This view has indeed a role in the investigations in *Hellier*: many times in fact the crew is found surprised by sound events whose source hidden from sight is so ambiguous that undermines any attempt at rationally categorise them. However, by recalling the communicative intent which is at the core of the *Hellier* investigative approach, the ‘listening’ which Connor mentions becomes, first and foremost, a call to recognise that the soundscape is never ontologically and epistemologically separated from the

listeners (Ingold, 2007), and that the listeners are themselves an integral and active part of it. Sound then reveals its fundamentally relational dimension, and listening becomes an active and productive intra-action:

I am in the soundscape through my listening to it and in turn the soundscape is what I listen to, perpetually in the present. [...] [S]ound is a relationship not between things but just a relationship, passing through my ears. (Voegelin, 2010, p.83)

Therefore, that night, surrounded by such field of auditory relationalities and acoustic intersubjective agencies, “[t]he spectre of sound unsettles the idea of visual stability and involves us as listeners in the production of an invisible world” (Voegelin, 2010, p.12): with the simple act of listening, this invisible world is at the same time discovered and produced. Moreover, the realisation that they are the only *people* listening radically shifts the focus from a human-centred dimension, to include a much broader relationship in action with the infinite diversity of potential agencies: some non-human, some even super-natural. This requires first and foremost a change in the very conceptualisation of listening, as:

Conceiving of listening in a narrowly anthropocentric way is wholly inadequate for understanding this profoundly polyphonic world. An expanded conception of listening concerns the responsiveness of bodies encountering sound – bodies of any and every kind, in different ways and contexts. (Gallagher, Kanngieser and Prior, 2017, p.620)

The ‘listening’ mentioned is therefore the listening in silence of this invisible world – and *to* the silence of the night – waiting for those natural background noises to unveil their communicative intent:

[A]n attention to the matterings, the complex emergent worlds, happening in everyday life. [...] The kinds of agency that might or might not add up to something with some kind of intensity or duration. The enigmas and oblique events and background noises that might be barely sensed and yet are compelling. (Stewart, 2011, p.445)

The listening performed in *Hellier* is directed towards a different idea of sound itself, requiring “an expansion of ideas of subjectivation, moving toward a more plural

approach” (Kanngieser, 2015, p.81). For the four investigators “[o]pening up and listening very carefully to the imperceptible, to the prospect of things beyond human cognitive and sensorial reach, and accepting their value and validity, is to leap into the unknown—a difficult process” (Kanngieser, 2015, p.82).

For Heys (2018), such a reconfiguration of perception away from the logics of the visual fundamentally changes the usual anthropocentric positioning of the human at the centre of a world which is considered as ‘all around’, distanced, separated and objectified. The problem here is not so much ontological but rather epistemological and, with its implications of flattening of the hierarchical domain of the human, ethical as well. A focus on listening, in fact, fundamentally unsettles this hegemonic, deterministic position:

Deprived of the ability to label and designate phenomena, we find ourselves momentarily dislocated, unable to situate ourselves as rational, centred subjects. Our positions, as subjects with an aptitude to sense, judge and implement our ideas upon our environment, based on the understanding that we are able to know and to name, are threatened when we are unable to articulate that which we perceive. It is the unspeakable that we consign to our subconscious and actively try to forget (Heys, 2018, p.16)

The acousmatic dimension of listening – an auditory devoid of visual confirmation – is therefore not only an imaginative (Idhe, 1970) or narrative device (Andean, 2016), but a way of knowing and relating with what stands before and alongside the representational, the semiotic, the linguistic. This is a highly important factor for the whole Tuning process of the paranormal, as sound perceptions become effectively the “conduits between the articulated and the unutterable, in the living-dead networks of perception” (Heys, 2018, p.16).

### **Drawing a circle around the territory: the paranormal as resonant practice**

The ‘intention setting experiment’ analysed above, enhanced and driven by a “willingness and expectation to be enchanted”, generates “a simultaneous opening up to possibility and indeterminacy” (Holloway, 2010, p.626): the potential that within the territory of Hellier things could sonically behave – and react to the investigators – in

unusual ways, revealing the movements of mysterious agencies of the place itself. With this process, new “practiced senses of space are disrupted and refigured, displaced and dislocated.” (Holloway and Kneale, 2008, p.304), activating a channel of communication with potential eerie agencies of the place. Throughout the episodes of the series, this is achieved by performing a wide range of practices – most of which are heavily sound-centred and involve audio technologies – as catalysts of interactions with the surrounding auditory environment.

The use of technological instrumentation is common in paranormal investigation practices, where it has a territorialising function which “creates and augments spaces” within which the affective intensities at the basis of the sensation of the eerie “find their momentary peak” (Espirito Santo and Barcelò, 2021, p.7). Most of the instruments employed in *Hellier* are sonic-based – radios, recorders, musical instruments, noise generators – or based on electromagnetic resonant processes – such as the debated God Helmet, a wearable device developed by the controversial psychologist Michael Persinger to allegedly enhance latent psychical abilities through exposing the brain to low frequency electromagnetic waves (Ruttan, Persinger and Koren, 1990).

The first experiment is conducted shortly after the ritual described above, during the first night in the cabin outside of Hellier. Here, Connor performs what they call an *Estes Method* session: a reinterpretation of the ghost box experiment, one of the cornerstones of contemporary ghost hunting practices. The ghost box – developed in the late nineties by paranormal researcher and maker Frank Sumption – is a radio receiver whose tuning circuit is modified to continuously sweep across the electromagnetic spectrum, thus producing a fragmented collage of randomised voices, sounds, music and interferences from multiple radio feeds. In the Spiritualist tradition of Electronic Voice Phenomena practices radio receivers are believed to allow disembodied spirits to communicate with the living by manipulating the incoming electromagnetic waves and recomposing the broadcasts into new meaningful sentences (Enns, 2005; Sconce, 2000; Parsons and Cooper, 2015). The ghost box experiment is usually performed in group situations, where the participants collectively ask questions, listen and interpret the alleged supernatural responses. Instead, the *Estes Method* version involves a complete isolation of the person in charge of the listening. The investigator acting as ‘receiver’ is blindfolded and wears noise cancelling

headphones, to minimise the influences of external stimuli and the confirmation bias they might elicit. The *Hellier* crew explains that a successful session occurs when the participants get “some compelling responses back and forth, conversationally” (*Hellier*, 2019): the feeling of a conversation in act, emerging from a meaningful two way interaction between the investigators and the radio feed is therefore what brings the sensation of the presence of an intentional agency behind an otherwise random succession of words.

The fundamental communicative aim of such experiments in *Hellier* is a strong point of departure from other paranormal investigation documentaries, where technology is most often used as devices to capture, record and measure *evidence* of alleged supernatural presences: tools such as temperature or electromagnetism meters, audio recorders or night vision cameras are employed to capture proof of ghosts, poltergeist or extraterrestrial activity. In *Hellier*, instead, technologies are never used to demonstrate – or debunk – the existence of supernatural phenomena. Conversely, they can be seen as what McCormack calls “devices for doing atmospheric things”: “a device, by virtue of the cloud of constitutive affective relations in which it is immersed, which participates in the generation of an atmospheric sensing of something happening that can be felt” (McCormack, 2015, p.91). Technologies and media are in *Hellier* the nodes of a complex and heterogeneous apparatus composed of material-discursive elements. By following Barad:

Apparatuses are not inscription devices, scientific instruments set in place before the action happens [...]. [A]pparatuses are not mere static arrangements in the world, but rather apparatuses are dynamic reconfiguring of the world, specific agential practices/intra-actions/performances through which specific exclusionary boundaries are enacted. (Barad, 2003, p.816)

In this sense, apparatuses are never solely descriptive but also productive of the phenomena they are supposed to be merely observing. The paranormal phenomenon is not a pre-existing, external object measured by an observing subject, but it is rather emerging from the agential cut produced from intra-acting agencies (Barad, 2003). Therefore, the eerie question of agency emerges in the very moment the technology is employed, and the communicative attempt is set in motion.

The experiment begins: Connor is sitting blindfolded, listening to the ghost box feed and reporting out loud anything he hears through the headphones. Meanwhile, the others listen to the fragmented flow of words and onomatopoeic utterances, they ask questions and converse with each other to interpret the 'answers':

Greg: "some people call you a goblin. Do you like that name?"

Connor: "GET READY."

Connor: "MOVING."

Dana: "Are you moving to the cave?"

Connor: "THE HILLS."

Dana: "to the caves in the hills? Are you going to meet us there?"

Connor: "RIGHT THERE."

Greg: "Up in the Flatwoods?"

Connor: "THE PEOPLE. MOVING." (*Hellier*, 2019)

The resulting conversation is erratic and often obscure, with few coherent moments interspersed with more accidental words. The message allegedly conveyed through the radio feed, however, is less important than the sensation of interaction which is established by the practice itself. In fact, some of the moments that the investigators consider particularly relevant are not directly related to – or providing particular relevant information about – their case. Instead, they are startled in surprise of a synchronisation in action, a correspondence in time and space between the investigators, their physical surroundings, and the felt eerie agencies, through the creation of 'meaningful coincidences'. During these situations, the sensation of a two-way interaction arises:

Connor: "THERE'S A COYOTE."

Dana: "Oh shit! [laughs]"

[...]

Dana: "where is the coyote?"

Connor: "RIGHT THERE."

Dana: "To the left or to the right? ...Over here? [pointing at the direction]"

Connor: "THEY'RE OVER THERE." (*Hellier*, 2019)

The ghost box is what Thacker defines a dark medium: a medium that "works too well", mediating not between two points in the same reality but between "different ontological domains" (Thacker, 2013, p.102), a *portal* in which "a media object [...] serves as a

passageway or conduit between the natural and supernatural” (Thacker, 2013, p.131). However, through the affective experiment set up in motion by the group, the natural and the supernatural ends of the communication channel stop being separated by an absolute ontological opposition and become instead the two extremes of an oscillatory continuum between the ordinary, everyday space of Hellier and the invisible world traced by eerie agencies felt as affective intensities. Connor, unaware of what is happening around him, reports words and fragments of sentences emerging as interferences from the radio background noise. Random happenings are charged with agency and intentionality by contingent relationalities emerging from the counterpoint between Connor’s flow of fragmented sentences and the questions asked by the other investigators:

And I felt...like we were definitely tapping into something more than just, you know, the coincidence of a word coming up in relation to what we were doing at that moment in time. It seemed stranger than that. It seemed more in touch. There was an alignment happening (*Hellier*, 2019)

The technological apparatuses used in paranormal investigations “have a ‘force-field’ that is given by the context in which they are employed”, which creates a different “attentiveness” (Espirito Santo and Barcelò, 2021, p.12). And this attentiveness is focused, in the case of *Hellier*, towards the emergent, synchronistic relationships that seemingly occur between the radio feed and the sonic events happening in the surrounding of the experiment. While listening to the words channelled by Connor, the other investigators deeply raise their focus towards the sonic world they are immersed into. The subtlest noise happening around them, overheard in an everyday situation, become here of crucial importance. But what captures the investigators’ attention is not so much the noises in themselves – the objective morphology of the sounds which is the focus of the Schaeffer’s *écouter* listening mode – but rather the way the dynamics of their happening produce the sensation of a communication in place:

we were hearing wood knocks that [were] seemingly communicating with us. [...] There were a lot of noises that we tried our best to kind of rule out as natural, animal noises. [...] they felt a little too pointed. (*Hellier*, 2019)



The sounds happening around them are normal sounds in a natural environment – cracking wood, the sounds of leaves and branches moved by the wind, animal cries, and so on – and the words coming out from the ghost box are indeed random interferences of what is effectively a malfunctioning radio. The sounds do not make the paranormal *appear* as ontologically present; they reveal a contingent development which seems to point at the existence of a communicative interaction at work, with a source which is neither absent nor present.

The experience of the paranormal therefore emerges as the registering of a causal connection of a *different* kind, a “divining cause”, “a kind of immanent reason for contingency” which is not “subjective but involves an objectively uncanny dimension of the real” (Ramey, 2014, p.41). This relationality, which also echoes the acausal connecting principle of the Jungian synchronicity (Jung, 1952), imbues the sounds with agency and intentionality, and the noises from the woods become the “audible manifestation of relations and interactions” (Di Scipio, 2014, p.12). The sensation of the eerie thus emerges as a question of agency, in which the investigators feel intentionality where there should not be: not (yet) a full presence but a “failure of absence” (Fisher, 2017, p.61). Another ‘dark mediation’ thus occurs, with sound not only mediating between the ordinary world of the cabin in Eastern Kentucky and the paranormal hidden within the woods, but also between the two different domains of the material – the physical, experiential dimension of being in the place and interacting with it – and the narrative – the story of their case and the lore of the place they are exploring. Therefore, the story of the Kentucky goblins – coming out from abandoned mines to disturb the locals with noises in the night – is not only ostensibly re-enacted through the messages coming from the ghost box, but it assumes a material, ecological and ultimately interactive form through affective, sonorous relationalities.

### **Sound as an active tool**

As seen above, sonic events intervene as the hint of a ‘dark’ communicative process at work between the investigators performing experiments and the potential agencies hidden within the surrounding environment. Sound signals have a crucial role in all the experiments performed throughout the episodes, and it is fundamentally the cornerstone of the perceptual dimension of the whole investigation. However, sound

in *Hellier* is not only something *happening*, a passive encounter that is charged, through the processes highlighted above, with the potential of the paranormal, but it is also employed as active tool to trigger the *activity* of the place. Towards the end of the second season, the investigators are preparing for a last communication ritual to be performed in a cave. During this period, Dana, Greg and Tyler channel a particularly clear message from an *Estes Method* session. They repeatedly hear three distinctive ‘tones’ – three pitches in a descending major triad – and what they interpret as the instructions to use such sounds as vibrational signals, to produce a physical effect upon the environment:

Tyler: “So here’s what’s so interesting about that. I believe I talked to Karl about this one day, but he was even stumbling on research talking about how things opened up...

Dana: “A DOOR”

Tyler: “A door! [laughs] would literally open up when you play certain sounds”

Dana: “A WAY THROUGH”

Greg: “A way through”

DANA: “WITH VIBRATION”

Tyler: With vibrations, yes!”

[...]

Tyler: “I’ve literally come across reports talking about people being in caverns, singing a song or hearing music, and something opens up. They’ll see something step up.”

[...]

Greg: “it’s like chanting, vibrations opening up doorways”

Greg: “So if we build a device that makes those...

Dana: “STAR SOUNDS”

[...]

Greg: “If we build a device that makes those noises and we bring it in, or take it somewhere, where do we take it?”

Dana: “VIBRATION”

[...]

Greg: “Where do we use this? That’s the question”

Dana: “IN THE SPACE BETWEEN” (*Hellier*, 2019)

This fruitful *Estes Method* session produced instructions that would then become the basis from which the crew would design the whole ritualised experiment. It would then be organised in different phases, involving multiple various magical and paranormal

procedures, but whose culminating point will be the diffusion in the space of the three channelled tones, in the hope that it would open some sort of portal:

And we have to like either...make something that will play those sounds...at a certain point I thought that we were supposed to play the sounds all at once [...] And it'll help open something. Vibrationally. (*Hellier*, 2019)

The cave itself becomes a fundamental component of the vibratory action they intend to carry out during the ritual:

we need to actually make this cave into a giant instrument for the ritual. [...] So we need to play the tones, [...] and see what happens. (*Hellier*, 2019)

The inspiration for this procedure comes to the investigators after discovering an academic paper pertaining to the field of archaeoacoustic (Yioutsos, 2019) which connects the ancient Greek cult of Pan with sonic practices performed in caves, connecting the sense of the numinous and the sacred with the acoustic quality of the place:

To approach [Pan], the ritual protocol demanded noise, and the resulting resonating and echoing effects of caves would have been regarded as signs of his divine presence. Furthermore, when there was no recorded experience of the god's presence in a natural space, one could perform a sort of evocation ritual in order to provoke these auditory effects by using various noisemakers [...]. (Yioutsos, 2019, p.123)

Caves are particularly important places for archaeoacoustic research, as places which "force individuals to use their other senses, such as touch and hearing, to reorient themselves" (Yioutsos, 2019, p.118), highlighting the important role of acoustic ecologies in the phenomenological dimension of the sacred experiences:

We can see, through the ages, continuity in the discovery and use of resonance and of its marvels: naturally vaulted galleries, curved recesses and round niches, or artificially made pots and apses or vaulted choirs and naves. [...] [R]esonance was appreciated for celebrations, chanting and singing, with the human voice praising the Invisible and its resonating mysterious sounds. (Reznikoff, 2006, p.83)

In the last episode the ritual is performed. Here, Connor begins to play the notes from a laptop connected to a portable loudspeaker, diffusing the sound in the cave for about half an hour. While this operation does not seem to have any clearly visible consequence, it provokes very strong reactions on all the participants, creating a shared atmosphere which seems to affect everyone. Some say that the tones made them “a little bit uneasy”, “made me sick”, or that “I hated the tones. They made me so anxious” (*Hellier*, 2019). All this combined with bodily sensations of dizziness and feeling of ‘vibrating’ or ‘wobbling’: the metaphorical ‘vibe’ felt at the beginning of the investigation re-emerges here as bodily sensation, through a physical feedback interaction between the cave’s natural resonances and Connor’s electronic tones. And this affective feedback produces another, emotional resonance which is considered by the participants as *the* ultimate experience of their investigation:

It was really emotional for me to do that...it was...I don’t know, it seems silly to say but I felt it happen. Whatever “it” was, I felt it happen. And it was there and I felt it and I was getting really emotional about it [...] I could feel...I don’t know, I was shaking, I was literally shaking (*Hellier*, 2019)

Once again, it can be seen how the experiences in *Hellier* are not encounters with ontologically fixed and stable entities but rather affective resonances, happenings which are at the same time subjective and external, material and emotional. In other words, what is enlivened through sonic eerie interactions are not so much the goblins as entities, but rather the experience of a contact with such potential agencies. Moreover, the experience of the paranormal is rarely a mere spontaneous, passive encounter: the supernatural agency is not something with which they simply ‘stumble’ upon, it is instead an intensity which emerges from attunement processes, from tunings with affective resonances before representations and narrativisation.

The processes described in this tuner section are at work in personal or group practices which subjectively charge a place with affective atmospheres of haunting and the eerie, due to the performative, in situ, building on a particular attunement with the most peripheral modulations of the surroundings. At the same time, however, such practices and experiences are represented in the form of an entertainment documentary show, thus necessarily extending from a personal domain towards a

potentially global circulation. This brings to a fundamental question: what is the relationship between the subjective, singular experience of the eerie in the context of the *Hellier* paranormal investigation and the broader occultural community that is the target of the series? The coming Detector section will attempt at tracing some answers, by outlining and analysing the extremely complex and multifaceted relationalities that *Hellier* establishes with its fanbase and with the online community of paranormal enthusiasts at large.

## 6.4 Detector

The previous section outlined the *Hellier* crew's methodology of attunement with the atmosphere of the eerie, the spatially diffused feelings that generate the potential of the presence of an invisible agency. Moreover, it traced how the sensation of eerie agencies emerged from performative dynamics of communication constructed through resonance-based ecological interactions. In this section the attention will be directed towards the actualisation of such potentialities, addressing the question on how, from group ritualised experiments, the explored places get charged with paranormal lore at a collective, (oc)cultural level. This will allow for a definition of the detector component of the Radio Sorcery process in *Hellier*, the 'decoding' of the phenomena and the events happening during the exploration into a semiotics of paranormal communication, and how does this circulate online. This section will approach the ways in which such processes establish a discursive resonance with the embodied sensation of the eerie, to effectively connect the experiential side of the investigation with its narrative, representational one: the case of the Kentucky goblins and the broader Fortean lore. This movement is the particular focus of the second season of *Hellier*, where the investigators move away from the small isolated town in Pike County to explore the highly paranormally-charged Kentucky border with West Virginia, home of the Mothman and stage of some of the seminal paranormal researches conducted in the 60s and 70s by the likes of Keel (1975), Barker (1970) or famous contactée stories such as Derenberger's alleged encounter with the extraterrestrial entity Indrid Cold (1971).

## The Mothman's dome experiment

During the second season, the *Hellier* case greatly expands, moving away from the strict focus on the Hellier town and its caves towards the broader area at the border between Kentucky and West Virginia. This geographical movement is driven by a discursive one: the investigators are progressively drawn towards the numerous connections between their investigation and the Mothman mythos and, in general, Keel's late-sixties research on the area of Point Pleasant, West Virginia, that made the place a cultural landmark of modern Forteanism. In particular, the research brings the investigators to reach one of the crucial places connected with the legend of the Mothman: the so-called TNT Area, an abandoned complex situated north of Point Pleasant, within the McClintic Wildlife Management Area, composed of a series of overgrown ruins of igloo-shaped bunkers, used during WWII as storage facilities for explosives and ammunitions (O'Neill, 2012).

This is the place where the first Mothman sightings have been reported, with the abandoned bunkers even being considered the hiding nest of the creature. Here, inside one of such 'domes' – as they call it – the *Hellier* crew would perform one of the most complex and multifaceted experiments of the whole series, highly relevant for the way its design establishes a connection between physical resonances – acoustic and electromagnetic – on one side, and narrative, symbolic and discursive ones on the other. The experiment will be particularly interesting in outlining how the lived experiences of the paranormal in *Hellier* are interpreted and framed, therefore proving to be a useful representation of the hermeneutical process at work in the Detector.

After making their way through the overgrown path and opening the rusted metal door of the bunker, the crew enter the semi-spherical concrete structure. They are then immediately overwhelmed by the strong reverberant and echoing character of the empty locale. The situation reminds the one set up by Kneale and Sasdy in *The Stone Tape*, where the abandoned haunted storage room was first of all recognised for its peculiar acoustics. In *Hellier* too the first thing the viewers learn about the place is its sonic character. The five investigators enter, look around and, immediately, they react to the peculiar echo: they start playing with it, activating it with their voice and their

footsteps. A similar scene, it can be remembered, was staged also during the first exploration of the storage room in *The Stone Tape*. Director Karl Pfeiffer is heard remarking “So disorienting” (Hellier, 2019) multiple times: the acoustic dimension unsettles the spatial awareness of the subjects dwelling in it. Moreover, the place transforms the linguistic, semiotic dimension of voice, and speech is extended, reconfigured: the subtitle caption on this scene, at some point, reads “[incoherent mumbling and echoes]”, remarking how voices are rendered almost indiscernible by the strong reverb. Instead, the objectivity of the spoken language gives way to an ecological dimension of voice as a projection of sound waves whose directionality is disrupted by the acoustics of the space, transforming the voice as a medium of vibratory affective intensities, more felt than heard.

Reverb makes the emptiness of the place physically perceivable: “the sound wave arriving at the ear is the analogue of the current state of the environment, because as the wave travels, it is charged by each interaction with the environment” (Truax, 1984, p.15). Therefore, the experience of reverb is an embodied registering of the place’s abandoned state and its fundamental liminal, in-between condition of an empty locale now stripped from its original function. This is similar to the hauntological dimension of reverb explored during the *Stone Tape* analysis. In this case too, listening opens up to a whole symbolic, historical and cultural-narrative dimension of the space, connecting the architectural resonances of the dome with reminiscences of its long gone past. As the haunted storage room in *The Stone Tape*, in fact, the TNT Area too is a place now empty and useless but whose reverberant agency reminds of its past and the agencies who inhabited it, human, non-human and, in the case of the Mothman, even supernatural. The reverb makes the investigator feel, bodily, the historical and emotional condition of the place: a place of memory and trauma, doomed to remain at the margin of society, a place infamous by the alleged toxicity of the accumulated military wastes, and used – according to local hearsay – for satanic rituals or Ku Klux Klan gatherings (Thornton, 2016). It is a liminal space, where human stories and legends of the non-human merge together mediated by reverb that make them resonate emotionally and affectively. There is in fact a persistence in the place, an almost psychometric energy that is captured by the attuned investigators:

I still feel that [Mothman's] energy, [...] it's still consistently concentrated I don't know if that has anything to do with the shape of the domes themselves, like, containing energy...or if it's something about the land, possibly. (*Hellier*, 2019)

It is the architectural *shape* of the dome to be considered a catalyst of such energy, which collects it and makes it resonating within its rounded walls: "Well, the Dome is built in the shape of something that, like..." (*Hellier*, 2019) introduces Dana, gesturing with her hands a movement of projection towards the sky. This energy is at the same time an embodied intensity and a narrative suggestion, and the Mothman itself becomes a translation of this energy, with the resonances of the places telling its story and its legend. The agency of the Mothman is manifested, once again, not as a full presence but as felt ecological interaction between the different forces at work in the place. The aim of the *Hellier* crew, while setting up and designing their next experiment, is precisely to tap into such energies, modulating them and becoming modulated by them, to establish a communicative connection with the eerie agencies of the place.

The experiment consists of a feedback process centred around Dana and Connor, performing with their very bodies two antennas as part of a two-way psychical mediation system, once again involving processes centred around the use of radio technologies while, at the same times, discursively interpreted as *radio-like*.

Greg: "well then why don't you [Connor] be the receiver and you [Dana] be the sender"

Dana: "you have to tell me what I need to be sending out"

Greg: "so we whisper into dana's ears and we wait for your answers...whoever's" (*Hellier*, 2019)

Connor performs an *Estes Method* session, he is blindfolded and wears noise-cancelling headphones to focus entirely on the radio-feed: he acts as the *receiver*. At the same time, Dana is psychically *transmitting* the questions whose answers are expected to emerge from the radio feed. As "enhancer" (*Hellier*, 2019) of her transmitting capabilities, Dana is going to wear a God Helmet. The device is made of a series of wearable head electrodes emitting specific electromagnetic waveforms believed to be able to maximise the inherent psychical abilities of every individual, by



reproducing the electromagnetic activity of the brain allegedly happening during spiritual or religious experiences.

The whole apparatus that the experiment map is quite complex, made of multiple heterogeneous resonances feeding back into each other. On one side, there is the radiophonic resonance in place with the *Estes Method*, which is tuned to the 'superspectral' vibratory plane where the 'phenomenon' is believed to be transmitting from. On the other, Dana is sending psychic messages aided by the brain-waves resonant amplification of the God Helmet. In between, the physical resonances of the place make the dome vibrate with the words and the actions of the participants, making the place's history, connotations and lore resonate with and within their experiment. Dana and Connor are sitting back-to-back, while the rest of the crew is arranged around them, interpreting and commenting the communicative flux, and conducting other corollary activities, such as tarot readings. These provide further imageries, ideas and connotations that feed into communication happening between Dana and Connor as well.

Connor repeats out loud the sound coming from the radio feed, his voice is transformed by the acoustics, echoed and reverberated at every utterance, becoming pure soundwaves that travel and touch everything in the room, physically connecting all the participants as an energetic current driving the experiment, enhancing its numinosity. There is a gravitas to the moments in which he is talking, amplified by a subtle droning soundtrack. He does not only repeat the words he hear but also imitates other auditory phenomena coming through the radio feed. A non-verbal, sonic communication is in place, alongside the linguistic one. Strange, sonic transmissions seem to be channelled:

Connor: I'm hearing "beeps"...dodododo, do [...]  
Greg: are you sending Morse code?  
Connor: dodododo, do  
Greg: it sounds like Morse code  
Connor: NO  
Greg: Oh it's not Morse code? Where are you?  
Connor: "do do do do, doka doka" (*Hellier*, 2019)

Dana, on the other side, asks questions. These are not directed to Connor, but instead to the eerie agencies he is channelling through the radio. Moreover, although verbalising them, the questions are intended to be sent internally. She therefore speaks calmly at low volume, almost whispering to herself: her voice is too quiet to activate the reverb. A different resonance is in place in this case, happening at a psychical rather than physical level, with her thoughts amplified by the God Helmet and focused by the dome's architecture towards the 'direction' of the paranormal place where the agencies are considered to be dwelling.

This communicative process, as much imagined as it is performatively unfolding, is for the investigators *the* manifestation of the phenomenon, which is perceived not as a full, ontological presence but as an atmospheric attunement. It is a tuning in which makes the dome feel as an opening between worlds, a place where the borders between the human territory and an 'outside' are made thin and porous. This border is not fixed and predetermined but rather a membrane which is made vibrating by the two sides' communicative efforts, transmitting felt intensities from one side to the other. Voices and actions on the human side excites the border, producing a reverberation on the other side, and the other way around. While the investigators' actions make the place physically resonating through acoustic relationships, their same actions make also the *superspectrum* resonate in a different way, producing a different communication: the refrain "acts upon that which surrounds it, sound or light, extracting from it various vibrations [...], projections, transformations" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, p.348), with the consequence of opening new territorial interactions.

Within these new territorial assemblages, new communicative affordances and new semiotics begin to emerge. Throughout the experiment, Dana and Connor spontaneously abandon a shared linguistic syntax, to construct an alternative mode of communication. Dana, in fact, begins to adapt her messages to the fragmented flow of words from Connor's *Estes Method*, not asking full questions anymore but rather uttering single words, with spontaneous association:

the word meant more than just the word and [...] each one of these words were sort of this condensed, concentrated thing that was really about communicating emotionally rather than verbally, or through language [...] each one of these

words meant 1000 times more than just the word itself. There were emotions and colors and all sorts of expressive, like, symbols that were attached to them (Hellier, 2019)

The performative apparatus they set up, therefore, operates a fundamental onto-epistemological shift in the role and nature of language. The meaning of the words is felt, emotionally, rather than rationally inferred from their linguistic meaning. In other words, it could be said that the words, from semiotic objects, become affective resonances:

Dana: “I wasn't understanding it here [points at her head] I was understanding [...] the symbols emotionally” (Hellier, 2019)

There is therefore a fundamental shift from the linguistic to the affective, and from the symbolic to the emotionally, embodied felt. Within this transformation, even the common meaning of things and objects is reconfigured in one of the most important manifestations of the eerie in the entire investigation: the sensation of synchronicity.

### **Synchronicity as noise and as methodology**

The episode here described is aptly called *Borderlands*, and the place is indeed connoted by its liminal condition, as a zone where symbols, signs and language assume different roles and affordances. The common meaning of the words, the images and the ideas that are generated by the feedback network of the experiment gets disrupted, becoming only the mediation for a meaningful coincidence, a synchronicity. At one point, Connor repeats an enigmatic phrase: “THREE. ON THE DECK” (Hellier, 2019). This apparently meaningless sentence, probably born from a random superimposition of multiple broadcast fragments, is immediately charged with a different significance and intentionality. The camera moves to a startled Greg who was, in the same moment, absent-mindedly playing with a deck of tarots. The card facing up, the only visible, is a three of wands:

Tyler: Did he say ‘on the deck’??

Greg: The three of wands.

[...]

Dana: “Three of wands is the card of journey”

Greg: “I’m gonna set this card down ‘cause it sounds like its important”

(*Hellier*, 2019)

The mode by which this chance occurrence is treated is highly representative of the investigators’ research methodology. The occurring of that specific card is considered “important” and meaningful. However, no further interpretation is given to it, for instance, by investigating in depth its divinatory meaning. Furthermore, the card itself is not brought back to the attention anymore at any time. It could be said, then, that the coincidence is not meaningful as *information*: what is important is not to decipher a mysteriously channelled message encrypted from ‘the other side’. It is instead the very happening of the coincidence to transmit the feeling of “something happening that can be felt” (McCormack, 2015, p.91), an atmosphere of pointedness, intention and eerie agency. It is as if language itself had lost its ordinary, deterministic meaning, to become a carrier modulated by feelings, by pre-representational affects.

Events like this are constitutive of the paranormal phenomenon in *Hellier*. In fact, seen under this light, the numerous experiments that the crew conduct throughout the episodes have the principal effect of producing words, images, events, ideas apparently unrelated to the case but which seem to recur at different stages in which they reappear, punctuating the development of the case with a feeling of external guidance, an invisible intentionality that imbues seemingly irrelevant places and events with eerie significance, and thus worthy of being explored. The apparatus of experimentation the participants set up attunes them, it invites them to a heightened attentiveness to otherwise overlooked changes in the surroundings, of chance encounters and surprising recurrences happening during the experimental session.

What the experiments sonically generate – for instance, through the fragmented audio of the ghost box, through the resonant enhancing of the brainwaves with the God Helmet, through the noise generators used in the Ganzfeld Experiment, or through the use of tones and musical instruments in reverberant spaces – are not mere paranormally-charged sounds. Instead, through sonic practices and resonant modes of interaction with the environments, the investigators *tune-in* to the network of agencies and relations underlying the whole case. They therefore access another,

subtler resonance, one connecting at a distance disparate details that a less attuned individual would not notice. These are coincidences and recurrences that are charged with agency and intention only if the investigator is deeply emotionally resonating with the case. And so the investigators are driven to make these events *matter*, as part of a synchronistic resonance that they feel as if it was vibrating – the “vibes” they constantly mention – all around them.

The focus of the investigative approach is to trace connections and resonances between such elements, whose recurrence and the way they punctuate the exploration is interpreted as meaningful and significant. In other words, what is produced from the experiment is not the evidence of a paranormal entity, but a meaningful coincidence which serves as direction, as vector that guides the development of the investigation, suggesting which areas to explore, which ideas to adopt, which books to read. Such connections are established by the repetition of random elements which mark non-deterministic relations between places, ideas and events at an entirely affective level. In this sense, the recurrence of a name or an object charges the context with a feeling of meaningfulness following different rules, outside the rational comprehension. But it is not that specific name itself to be relevant, it is not the object of the synchronicity that becomes meaningful: what is meaningful is the connection itself. Suddenly, a day of exploration which did not seem to provide any interesting result; an apparently irrelevant book read in search for answers; an interview with someone who did not have particular experiences to share, they all become significant: something might have been missed there, it might be worthy going back and pay more attention.

In *Hellier*, synchronicities are not considered “just random, mystical-type occurrence or signposts. [...] they might be manifestations of the phenomena. [...] in some ways it could be almost a way of communication” (*Hellier*, 2019). What is here relevant, is that in this sensation of communication the synchronicities are not meaningful as symbols or signs that need to be deciphered in order to acquire new knowledge relevant to the investigation. Elements such as the mental image of a rusted tin can, a blue star-shaped birthday balloon, the surname ‘Parsons’, the number 93, folkloristic wooden carving of the Green Man and many others, which constitute the content of the some of the main synchronicities in *Hellier*, are not meaningful in themselves. Rather, what is meaningful is their co-incidence, their recurrence throughout the

investigation, their seemingly repetitive pattern. The synchronicities in *Hellier* are literal connecting principles, hints of an intentionality, an agency at work which however does not manifest itself in a form of (esoteric) language, but rather as the feeling of interaction:

[...] synchronicities aren't necessarily a lead to "follow this", but they could just be noise that is a side effect of looking into these phenomena in the first place. (*Hellier*, 2019)

The event of the synchronicity is therefore considered information noise that emerges as a result of the investigators' psychological attunement with the case. The noise could be conceived as a McLuhanian metaphor for the message intrinsic in the mediation process itself: the a-signifying background noise that happens whenever a channel of communication is opened, such as when a radio receiver is tuned to a station which is not yet broadcasting any message but whose background noise demonstrates the correct functioning of the communication system. In other words, synchronicities are not messages to be decoded, but the emergent phenomenon of a correctly attuned investigative process:

You're following a trail in the woods because there are marks on trees. [...] Where it's leading [...] you don't know! But [...] if you ask "who chipped away at those trees" you're missing the point. The point has got to be that the path leads somewhere, every synchronicity tells you you're on the path. If the synchronicities stop, or if they become vague, then you're off the path (*Hellier*, 2019)

The noise metaphor mentioned by the *Hellier* crew allows us to recognise the fundamental resonant quality of the experience of synchronicity itself. The images, the objects and the signs that compose the synchronistical network in *Hellier* are born from the investigators' sonic practices of activating and amplifying the vibratory resonances of place, as well as its *eerie resonances*: the peripheral sensations of agency that they interpret as 'vibes', as affective vibratory intensities, and which determine the foundation for their experience of the paranormal. What is particularly important is that, in the encounter with the synchronicity, the often entirely visual quality of the object itself dissipates – and with it its fixed, taken for granted signification – to become *noise*, a

sort of synesthetic reverberation of the crew's resonant practices, which influence material reality around them and produce new information, new meaning. Synchronicity in this sense bridges the resonant with the resonance-like, the vibration with the 'vibe', the perceptual with the atmospheric.

For the investigators, these synchronistical resonators are not fixed objects anymore, nor do they possess semiotic or linguistic meaning in themselves, but they are instead pure connections, resonating together with meaning, significance and intention. It is a *non-cochlear listening* (Kim-Cohen, 2012) to affective, contingent relationalities of the everyday, which do not follow visual logics of objective or deterministic separation but are connected together through resonant exchanges. The tools and the practices they use to attune to the eerie atmospheres of the surroundings – their tools for “doing atmospheric things” (McCormack, 2015, p.91) – extend the sensorium beyond the common separation of its five basic channels. They become instead synesthetic feedback loops where sonic practices produce sensations that charge otherwise irrelevant visual images, which in turn direct new sound experiments, that will activate further visual objects, and so on.

For this reason, the experience of the synchronicity in *Hellier* is not only the principal manifestation of the paranormal but a process at the basis of their investigative methodology: to set up experiments and performances which catalyse and amplify the potentiality of synchronicity means to unveil connections and correspondences that need to be followed to progress through the investigation. The real outcome of the experiments and the explorations in *Hellier*, therefore, is the creation of a different cartography of the geographies that compose the case. This cartography describes a territory where things are connected to each other by sensations of synchronicity, where paths and directions are traced by emotional, affective and imaginative trajectories. The next sections will analyse the wider implications of this synchronicity-based methodology, highlighting a fundamental relational dimension that the crew's approach constructs with the audience and the paranormal community at large, which becomes a mythmaking process with real world sociocultural implications.

## **“Where is my Point Pleasant?”: John Keel as mythmaker, as sorcerer and as model**

The structure of the paranormal investigation documented in *Hellier* shares various similarities with the practice of legend tripping. The methodologies employed, as well as the approach to spatial exploration, can be associated to those forms of “ostensive play”, which are at the basis of legend tripping practices, involving the “travelling to a specific location attached to a legend” with the intent of “both [recreating] the storied events and simultaneously [expanding] the tale by adding their experiences to the core narrative” (Koven, 2007, p.186). However, *Hellier* lacks a fundamental element, necessary for it to be considered a legend tripping: the legend itself. As Gabbert states:

the site of legend quests are places already pre-inscribed with narrative, and the stories that circulate are inextricable from the locations in which they occurred. The narrative makes the landscape mean, and the landscape gives evidence to the story. (Gabbert, 2015, p.146)

In the case of *Hellier*, instead, the places around which the investigation is centred are devoid of a pre-inscribed paranormal lore. The relationship between landscape and story identified by Gabbert is not something existing *a priori* in the *Hellier* investigation, but it is in fact *the* emergent phenomenon of the whole project. The story of the *Hellier* goblins is something that does not exist outside the emails received at the beginning of the series, and the purpose of the investigation, it could be said, is to discover this hidden lore of the place as much as it is to *construct* it: *Hellier*, ultimately, documents *and* represents a lore in-the-making. It follows five paranormal investigators moved by the supernatural suggestion of an event whose very happening is continuously questioned, engaging with explorations of everyday geographies, feeling the potential ‘high strangeness’ of the place, performing ritualised experiments. And all this, in order to generate a network of synchronistic connections between places, stories, sensations, imaginations, symbols and so on, to arrive at outlining a new cartography of Eastern Kentucky, one charged with potential paranormal vectors and agencies running within its borders.



Here is where the connection with John Keel becomes most significant: not as just a way to connect their case with some famous paranormal mythos, but as a fundamental inspiration for the purposes, and the aims of the whole case. In other words, they recognise in Keel the model and inspiration for what they want to achieve with *Hellier*, that is, the construction of a lore. Director Karl Pfeiffer makes this clear in an early episode, when he discusses one of the first synchronistical resonances found between the *Hellier* case and the research conducted by Keel:

From the start I've compared this case to the Mothman Prophecies story, which was John Keel's massive research project [...]. It's a story that I've always kind of held close to me. Like, it's such a bizarre case that I think anyone who's fascinated by this High Strangeness would read that book and say, like, "Where is my Point Pleasant?". Like, "where's my story that I can get lost in that weirdness and have these encounters, one after another, that just blow the mind. And so from the start with this Goblins case in Kentucky I felt like this is kind of a Point Pleasant case. (*Hellier*, 2019)

The Point Pleasant Karl is talking about extends beyond its geographical map. More than a physical place, it is a territory where things behave according to different semiotics: a Fortean *extra-geography*, which does not exist as a completely *other* ontological plane, but is instead composed of strange currents and relationships which "*always* [lurk] beneath the familiar, everyday landscape" (Dixon, 2007, p.201). Extra-geographies are defined by Charles Fort (1923) as peripheral territories that emerge from the margins, composed of everything that a rational, deterministic categorisation of the real leaves behind, rejecting it because conflictual with hegemonic scientific theories. Extra-geographies are the territory where the eerie "question of the agency of the immaterial and the inanimate" (Fisher, 2017, p.11) almost acts as a non-religious hierophany (Eliade, 1957), refrains that re-centre the cartography of the taken-for-granted real beyond the sole subjectivity, becoming instead a resonating place where the unexplainable, the weird, the fringe can be tangibly experienced.

The extra-geographic Point Pleasant Karl is driven towards is a 'story in whose weirdness he can get lost': it is an experience of deterritorialisation, and the creative, narrative forces that can emerge from the exploration of its unknown affordances. Therefore, the question "where is my Point Pleasant?" could be translated into "where

is that resonance I can get attuned to, to set in motion a process which makes me able to interact with the place in a similar way as Keel did?”. In other words: how to tune the Radio Sorcery? For the *Hellier* group, following Keel’s footsteps is a way to attune to the same processes that made Keel part of the history of paranormal research:

it suddenly became part of wider fringe phenomena that had been occurring since the 50s. Things that were investigated by some of the most famous heads of paranormal investigation. So John Keel was now intertwined with all of the stuff that we were looking into. (*Hellier*, 2019)

The Keel connection is a way to place *Hellier* within the continuum of the history of American Forteanism, not just as a documentary series which engages with similar themes, but as an experience which taps into the same phenomena, producing the same effects and affects:

So, there's a precedent for this phenomena it's not just the 60s and 70s, it continues into today. Even 15 years ago when this editor met John Keel and was ready to compile his works from back in the day they started experiencing a lot of the same things than we did in our case (*Hellier*, 2019)

Therefore, seen under this light, *Hellier* is not a documentary on a paranormal research but, rather, a documentation on how to become paranormal *researchers*. And, as Keel, Vallée, Barker and the rest of the protagonist of post-1950s American ufology did, this is made not by merely popularising a supernatural event, nor by searching for incontestable evidence of the existence of the supernatural, but by becoming “a publisher and a hoaxer, to be sure, but both of these are part of his grander role in the cultural narrative of Ufology: that of a mythmaker” (McKee, 2019, p.286).

Hoaxing, in this sense, does not merely mean to produce false claims and misinformation, but instead to be able to manipulate and transform the porous boundaries existing between fiction and reality, between cultural representations and lived experiences. In other words, this mythmaking process must involve an hyperstitional process, understood as an element of culture that makes itself real (CCRU and OrphanDrift, 1999), a “positive feedback circuit including culture as a component. It can be defined as the experimental (techno-)science of self-fulfilling

prophecies” (Land and Carstens, 2009). The Mothman, whose sightings were localised in the Point Pleasant area between 1966 and 1967, would have never become the global mythos that it is today without Keel’s *The Mothman Prophecies* and the subsequent 2002’s inspired film. Nowadays, the Mothman is known beyond Keel’s writings, Point Pleasant has a Mothman Museum, a bronze statue of the winged cryptid, as well as a festival dedicated to the monster that attracts thousands of enthusiasts every year. But most of all, people did, and still do, experience the Mothman: they see it, they hear it, they feel it, and then they share their stories, further actively contributing to the mythmaking about the cryptid. At the source of the *Hellier’s* Detector, therefore, there is a complex and multifaceted process of coagulating affective atmospheres into hyperstitions, feelings of presence and ‘vibes’ of the place in ways that are not only descriptive but productive of a phenomenon, of an experience and even of a whole lore: an experience which is lived collectively, in resonant interaction with the whole history of paranormal narratives.

### **Becoming (radio) sorcerer**

What is, in this context, a mythmaker? It is an agency which can unsettle the semiotic boundaries of a territory, to then create and transform a new one: from an abandoned war bunker to the nest of a cryptid; from a tiny miners’ town to a place invaded by disembodied goblins. Someone or something that can operate the Radio Sorcery system and making it resonate globally, by charging the place beyond the personal experience, and making it, to say it with Keel, an emanation of energy tuned to the superspectrum. Sorcery is, for Deleuze and Guattari, closely connected to the problem of territorialisation. The sorcerer is in fact the agency which, with a “fascination for the outside” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, p.240), reaches the borders of the territory through a process of becoming, which involves a “pact with a demon” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, p.243). The demon, in this sense, is ‘the anomalous’, identified as the “phenomenon of bordering” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, p.245) of a territory. The demon, as a deterritorialised state, stands before – or beyond – representations and subjectifications: it “has only affects, it has neither familiar or subjectified feelings, nor specific or significant characteristics” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, p.244).

But as a phenomenon of bordering, it can be recalled, it is conceived in Deleuze and Guattarian theory in vibrational terms: the rhythmical or oscillatory organisation of chaotic affective forces which are territorialised through the process of the refrain. Ramey clarifies that “[a]t the center of sorcery, [...] are *fascinations* in which one is overwhelmed by or possessed of certain affects”, “intensities or vibrational oscillations that expose, *within* affects and their intensification, an uncanny interconnection or “Interkingdom”” (Ramey, 2014, p.14). In Keel’s theory, this is called a *window*, a spatiotemporal situation where a psycho-physical connection with the superspectrum can temporarily happen, with specific vibratory exchanges that produce *non-events*, happenings in between the hallucinatory and the material:

When a specific individual with proper qualifications is located in a specific “window” area at a time when specific electromagnetic conditions exist (a “flap” period), then that individual is able to perceive beyond the visible spectrum or, possibly, intercept a “signal” that plants an image in his or her mind. While the image may be very vivid and detailed, it is actually non-real, subjective, and “hallucinatory.” [...] “We term these cases “non-events.” They are quite real to the percipient, and can rarely be distinguished from objective sighting reports of possibly solid physical objects [...]. (Keel, 2013)

The demon with which the sorcerer trades, therefore, can be seen as the resonant frequency of such window areas, the material-discursive resonances that the *Hellier* investigations attempt at attuning with, during the ritualised experiments previously discussed. Following this approach, the demon in *The Stone Tape* is the physical acoustic resonance of the haunted storage room, while in the Philip Experiment it is Philip itself, who becomes accessible after tuning the multimodal spectrum of circular performances to the right repetitional rhythm.

As mentioned, there must be a specific relation between the mythmaker – the sorcerer – and the collective, which is often complex and necessary at the same time. Deleuze and Guattari state that the alliance with the demon-border involves “a rupture with the central institutions that have established themselves or seek to become established” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, p.247). The sorcerer therefore “express[es] minoritarian groups, or groups that are oppressed, prohibited, in revolt, or always on the fringe of recognized institutions” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, p.247). There is a marginal

dimension to the sorcerer, which holds “the anomalous position, at the edge of the fields or woods. They haunt the fringes. They are at the borderline of the village, or *between* villages” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, p.246). This deterritorialised position is however in a continuous state of oscillation producing “a porous border between the group and the Outside” (Ramey, 2014, p.13). Keel, in this sense, is the epitome of the sorcerer. He dedicated his life to Fortean phenomena at the limits between the fictional and the actual. He is a writer sometimes praised as revealer of groundbreaking truths, sometimes considered a delusional believer, sometimes ruthlessly criticised as a hoaxer. His theories have always been confined at the borders of the ‘pseudoscientific’. As a researcher, his rigour is problematic as he “loses detachment and becomes personally involved in the unfolding drama” (Rickard quoted in Dixon, 2007, p.201): his involvement with the anomalous is a personal, a pact with a demon which almost consumed him in later life, forcing him to abandon the Fortean research.

The notion of the sorcerer, in relation to territorial assemblages, delineates a process which, in the case of *Hellier*, is progressively developed throughout the series. Its pivotal moments are breakthroughs coming from the engagement with things and places which, most of the time, are suggested by orientations given by synchronistical connections. The investigators refine the synchronistic methodology episode after episode, and the trail of synchronicities becomes more and more significative, eventually making the group feel an intentionality behind the a-causal events, as if personally addressed to each one of them. The sensation they feel is that of being guided along a path already written, leading them on a *journey* to become sorcerers, to become mythmakers like Keel. Deleuze and Guattari relevantly declare that the process of becoming-sorcerer happens through “initiatory journeys” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, p.249), and this is precisely the terminology used by the investigators multiple times, often referring to Campbell’s seminal text *The Hero’s Journey*, as if to remark once again the connection between experience and a narrative view of reality. What is particularly relevant is the scope of this journey, which extends beyond the personal development of the five investigators, to become conceived, towards the later episodes, as encompassing the whole community of fans gathered around *Hellier*, an initiation ritual involving the creation of a new community, a new way of conceiving the paranormal and even reality itself. In this sense, it will be highlighted below, *Hellier* becomes a catalyst for a countercultural affiliation, based around a challenge for

reductive deterministic rationalism and directed instead towards a synchronistical, atmospheric approach to the paranormal within the everyday.

### **Synchronicity as collective mythmaking**

From its early days, *Hellier* quickly became widely popular in social media, specialised websites and forums:

It was everywhere. People we're responding to it in a way that I never could have anticipated. *Hellier* basically goes viral, everyone's talking about this project in ways we still struggle to understand. (*Hellier*, 2019)

In particular, an active and vibrant online community begun to gather in the *r/Hellier* subreddit. A strong contribution comes from the regular interaction that the *Hellier* crew maintains with the fans through their social media accounts, often even intervening in unofficial forum discussions as well. There is in fact a form of participation of the audience in the series itself that is one of the most peculiar and unique aspects of the entertainment project. Online, the fans discuss and comment with the creators of the series itself, they share their own paranormal experiences with them, they ask for clarifications and for personal beliefs.

In certain cases, the audience even propose different investigative approaches, different hypothesis on the events portrayed in the episodes and further develop the theories and concepts with ideas which are then sometimes incorporated in the official investigation. The creators in fact often openly ask for the fans' contributions, and many of the directions, techniques and theories utilised in the second series come from external suggestions via e-mail or social media. For the crew, this online exchange with the fans and with the broader occultural community is an important point that has the potential to directly influence the future developments of the case, as documented multiple time during the second season:

We're literally sending the biggest signal [...] I hope people who've had similar experiences [...] reach out to us; I hope people who maybe have an expertise that we don't have reach out to us; I hope the public helps; I hope they assist, I

think we're going to get interesting leads out of finally making this thing public.  
(*Hellier*, 2019)

The involvement of the fans, however, is not *only* confined to a 'theoretical' contribution – such as sharing ideas, thoughts or suggestions – becoming instead an active process of re-enactment and participation. Some in fact, after watching the series, began to even conduct their own investigations in situ, exploring the places portrayed in the episodes and producing a whole additional body of research which is then shared online. These new 'non-canonical' data become part of the ongoing online conversation, involving the official crew as well, who in turn comments on the findings, suggests further developments or warns against the dangers of non-experienced paranormal investigations.

The phenomenon that can be traced here is the transformation of a fanbase into a community, and from a community of interest into a community of practice. A community of interest is defined around shared interests, a space where a group can gather together to discuss a particular topic of interest, exchange information and express their opinions. The members do not have to be practitioners, and the community is not formed around 'expertise' (Hughes, Jewson and Unwin, 2013). On the other hand, the community of practice is instead defined as a group of active practitioners, who interact together to provide mutual support on that practice, to discuss methodologies and share results. The community of *Hellier* develops the practice demonstrated in the episodes, performing the same experiments, the same methods and utilising the same tools – such as the *Estes Method* – often reenacting them in the same areas portrayed in the series.

Within this tight network of participation and exchange, the interactions between audience and crew begin to behave in unexpected ways, allegedly arriving at assuming paranormal connotations: when the fans report their own amateur investigations, in fact, they begin to report the same synchronistic events that are represented in the series. In a long post on the r/*Hellier* subreddit entitled "Hellier is contagious... is the documentary being used as an invitation to an initiation journey?", a user explains how after watching the series they begun to experience the same synchronicities happening to the crew. A rapid browse of the online forums dedicated to *Hellier* easily demonstrate

the scope of this recurrent phenomenon: the threads are literally filled with photos of balloons, of tin cans, of faces of the *green man* carved on wood, of names written on walls and billboards, of particular passages in books, all elements holding synchronistic connection with the series. These are not only findings that the fans encounter during their own investigations, but rather a continuous manifestation of the pervasiveness of *Hellier's* synchronicities in the fans' everyday life. The common discourse that can be found online is that *Hellier* is able to make the viewers resonate with a world of high strangeness that begin to spread even in their everyday life.

While the creators consider the synchronicities as the background noise that confirms their attunement to the story they are at the same time constructing and discovering, so for the fans sharing the synchronicities with their heroes becomes a form of supernatural belonging, a deep affiliation: in other words, an initiation. The Radio Sorcery process becomes here distributed across the community: all the fans are antennas that capture the discursive influences of *Hellier*, that contribute to the series' Tuner through online attuned interaction, and whose shared experience of synchronicity becomes the interpretative tool for the Detector, the interpretation of the whole project. The process at work here is a feedback loop: the fans experiencing the synchronicities feel 'chosen', while the crew show such experiences as the demonstration of the authenticity of the documentary series. Fiction and experience begin to resonate together and *Hellier*, a show that – independently from the legitimacy of the events it portrays – for its entertainment nature presents necessarily fictionalised facts through editing, screenplay and post-production, it hyperstitionally generate a collective network that self-oscillates in cycles of mutual affection, experience and narrativisation.

This phenomenon is widely discussed in the second season, in which the creators themselves begin to consider it the ultimate meaning of the whole investigation:

It might be bigger than us, bigger than just that cave that night. It might be this project itself. The results of the ritual might not even happen to us, I keep thinking about this idea that they might happen to the audience at home in watching this as part of the ritual. (*Hellier*, 2019)



The series itself becomes considered as a catalyst for a collective initiatory journey which moves beyond the mere interest, mediated by the resonation of shared synchronicities. Influenced by contemporary magic practices, the investigators arrive at conceiving the series as a “hyper sigil” in which “potentially even the documentary that we're making is part of this magic working” (*Hellier*, 2019). The whole series therefore begins to be interpreted as part of a global ritual of initiation happening through the communal power of the shared synchronicities (Talking Weird, 2020).

### ***Hellier* as the call for a counterculture**

This phenomenon of shared synchronicity creates an involvement between the fans and the creators that makes *Hellier* considered by many as more than just a story they are passionate about, and more than an inspiration for conducting their own explorations in the Fortean world. *Hellier*, as a “call”, becomes an invitation for an all-encompassing way of welcoming the *weird* within everyone's everyday life. The call is to actively develop techniques to conjure the weird and to share it, to make the experience of it the access to a whole community of individuals who not only share interests and practices but a whole view of reality. And it is a view in which synchronicities, subtle feelings of place, unexplainable resonances between external and internal are taken seriously and are considered capable to make the world more diverse and interesting.

In an online article entitled ‘Paranormal Docuseries *Hellier* Inspires a New Wave of Weirdos’, the author declares that *Hellier* “may be a source of some of the things we’re sorely lacking right now—community, open-mindedness, connection and optimism. (Anderson, 2020). In another one, a fan comments on the community that they found after being involved in the *Hellier*’s online discussions: “I say friends because, in the years since, I’ve developed fun relationships with people in the community [...]. Relationships that I hadn’t had before”, something that for the author is unprecedented: “[...] growing up in a tiny town in rural Paraguay, a conservative, highly religious country, this kind of comradery around things we can’t explain is something I could have only dreamed of” (Codas, 2023).

As demonstrated by this last quote, even an ethical dimension seems to emerge from this fans' perception. In a Reddit post entitled "Hellier and the change we all need", a fan shares the transformative experience of watching *Hellier* and getting in contact with its community: "Like a lot of people here, Hellier really resonated with me and kindled something in me. My passing interest in weird became an active interest" ([Deleted Reddit User], 2019). The author then denounces the toxic, non-inclusive and even downright racist dynamics that they often encounter in paranormal or occultural communities, hoping instead that "Hellier and the people who have been inspired by it can bring in some change" ([Deleted Reddit User], 2019). Producer Greg Newkirk personally replied to the post, further amplifying this vision:

Why do you think Hellier has been met with so much aggression from so much of the "old guard"? [...] the truth is, the whole idea of Hellier scares them because so much of it is uncharted territory through the forests they feel like they've already sufficiently explored.  
[...] The community around the paranormal is seriously toxic, egocentric, and built on fear of the unknown instead of actually trying to engage it. It's afraid of change. (GregNewkirk, 2019)

This is ultimately what the alleged collective initiation ritual seems to be directed towards: a change and a challenge through a renewed importance of the weird and the Fortean in everyone's everyday life. It is the drive to "helping build a better community", subverting and openly challenging the "old guard" that is considered afflicted by "accessibility, inclusivity, and gatekeeping problems" (GregNewkirk, 2019).

At the end of the comment, Newkirk directly states the ethical project: "Hellier calls who its meant to. In a lot of ways, it's a recruitment effort for a new community. New Rituals. Curiosity over fear" (GregNewkirk, 2019). With this, a strong countercultural connotation to the *Hellier* community is made evident. This counterculture proposes a paradigm which rejects linearity, determinism, causality and evidence-based thinking in place of a disposition towards the coincidence, the deviation, the marginal all becoming source of meaning and direction. A fundamental element of countercultures is "a fairly well thought-out alternative to conventional society' and, [...] some sense that this alternative mode of living 'would induce change in the rest of society'" (Gelder, 2007, p.22). For Bennett, in countercultural paradigms "lifestyle sites and strategies

pertain not only to the objects, images and texts that individuals consume, but also how they inscribe them with specific meanings, which in turn are embedded in the everyday realities with which groups and individuals are confronted” (Bennett, 2022, p.8). The countercultural dimension around *Hellier* is however unstructured and mobile, “fluid and mutable expressions of sociality that manifest themselves as individuals temporarily bond to express their support of and/or participation in a common cause, but whose everyday lives are in fact simultaneously played out across a range of other cultural terrains” (Bennett, 2022, p.10).

‘New Rituals. Curiosity over fear’ became, after its appearance on Newkirk’s Reddit comment, a sort of slogan for the *Hellier* community, often written by the fans in their social media posts. In this sense, the methodology defined by the investigators in the series becomes considered as a toolkit to act upon the world to produce these resonances of chance and positivity. The fans that perform the *Estes Method*, that legend trip in search for synchronicities, and in general that follow those peripheral affordances of the everyday promoted by *Hellier* almost assume the shape of an activism. At the same time, the countless photos of blue star balloons, of rusted tin cans, of faces carved in trees, become considered ritualistic action that can contribute to bring change in the rationalistic, reductionist world. It is here that *Hellier* manifests its countercultural project: not only an interest or a passion, but an active challenge to a hegemonic cultural episteme that is considered retrograde and toxic, and that through the invitation of “that type of weird thinking into your life” (*Hellier*, 2019) that *Hellier* teaches the fan.

### **The effects of the counterculture**

Through this countercultural production and exchange, both the fans and the creators of the series mutually contribute to a feedback process of expectation and confirmation that has the crucial real-world effect of charging the places explored in *Hellier* with new meanings, new affordances and new stories of lived experiences. What happens is, indeed, a collective ritual of attunement to the potential of the paranormal in the little town of Hellier and its surroundings, made resonating with the rest of the American

Fortean lore – the Mothman, the myth of Indrid Cold,<sup>8</sup> the occult lore of the underground hollow Earth,<sup>9</sup> and so on – not only through the circulation of new narratives emerging from the series but through the embodied, shared experience of synchronicity and collective initiation. As more and more people follow the steps of the *Hellier* crew, claiming to experience phenomena and to feel the *weirdness* of the place, posting their stories online that are then further shared by other fans and by the crew themselves, the places, begins to be more and more recognised within the occultural community even beyond the fans of *Hellier*.

Youtube channels spread the story of the *Hellier* case, such as Bedtime Stories, which released a two-part documentary video on the “Kentucky Goblins” (Bedtime Stories, 2019) – with one million views each – which summarises the events of *Hellier* while barely mentioning the original series. Numerous podcast episodes have been produced with *Hellier* as their main focus, sometimes inviting the creators or even the authors of the books mentioned in the series as guests. Fake books appear on Amazon pretending to be first-hand accounts revealing the mystery of the Kentucky goblins (Cold and Wriste, 2022). The process at work here can be seen as similar to the one explored in *The Stone Tape*: a work pertaining to the field of fiction and entertainment extends beyond its field, and the concepts that are developed diegetically gradually detach from the original text to assume an autonomous forms, utilised by a broader audience as legitimate theories, hypotheses or frameworks. As a long-lasting stone tape theory stemmed from *The Stone Tape* and is nowadays conceived as a hypothesis of haunting phenomena, so the techniques, the methods and the epistemological frameworks proposed in *Hellier* are already developing as autonomous methodologies for paranormal investigations: one relevant example being the recent spread of the *Estes Method* as a widely adopted technique in numerous paranormal shows online and on television.

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<sup>8</sup> A famous account of encounter with an extraterrestrial entity claimed by Woodrow Derenberger (1971) and that, over the decades, became intertwined with other Fortean mythos, such as the happenings in Point Pleasant, or the lore of the Men in Black.

<sup>9</sup> In particular the so called ‘Shaver Mystery’, an alleged account on encounter with underground alien populations popularised in the early Forties by sci-fi and weird literature publisher Ray Palmer in his *Amazing Stories* magazine.

Online, memes on *Hellier* go viral (fig.11). These mock the recurring aspects the fans are continuously referring to on social media: the obsession with synchronicities, the intrinsic silliness of taking seriously trivial objects such as balloons and tin cans, and the slight sense of pretentiousness that seem to characterise the stereotypical *Hellier* fan. These memes however have a stronger role than just mocking a popular online sensation, being in fact an integral agent in the process of the identity and belonging of the counterculture. In this sense, “Mememes seek to elicit shared feelings among users, and in doing so, invite users to reinforce their alignments with collective identities. [...] [W]hen a reader identifies and aligns with the values construed in a meme, they recognize that they are the intended audience of the text, and that they *belong* to that community.” (Newton et al, 2022, p.11). Being recognised as a ‘Hellier enthusiast’, however further consolidate the sense of belonging and the separateness from the mainstream , as “the use of Internet memes should be seen as a form of literacy, incorporating both direct knowledge of meme templates and a wider understanding of specific groups or communities [...], this literacy is not only needed in order to understand memes but also functions as a gatekeeper, marking communal belonging to a group “in the know”” (Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2017, p.485).



Figure 11 - Hellier memes (C0DESTRONG, 2022; IncreasinglyAgitated, 2020)

The countercultural process outlined so far has the real-world effect of making the town of Hellier and its surroundings charged with stories, experiences and legends of

haunting, of cryptozoology and of ufological activity. The isolated miner town, which is described as “dead” and “in the middle of nowhere” by the *Hellier* crew at the beginning of their investigations, has become an epicentre of paranormal activity and a place that more and more attracts interest from outside its community. In 2021, for instance, the town of Hellier has been included in the “Haunted Trail of the Kentucky Wildlands” (Dobbs, 2021), thus becoming effectively as a destination for dark tourism (Stone, 2013).

Most of all, however, it is the highly involved *Hellier*’s fans that physically engage with explorations of the places portrayed in the series, to follow the steps of their inspirators, in the hope to be caught in synchronicities and, maybe, even further extending the documentary’s official investigation. It is a practice that is encouraged by the *Hellier* crew themselves, as part of the countercultural call to search for achieving everyone’s own first hand experiences, and the fans naturally tend to ostensibly reproduce the investigations performed in the episodes, taken as methodological guidelines. However, such practice of directly translating into the real world a fictionalised representation – as edited, scripted and post-produced – generates problematic effects on the rural town of Kentucky and its surroundings. After the popularisation of the series, in fact, the fans’ legend tripping to the places of *Hellier* evidently begun to create issues with the locals, to the point that the first ‘rule’ of the r/Hellier subreddit is: “No trespassing, no doxxing, no harassment of locals / cast” (r/Hellier). The fans’ community intervention in the town of Hellier and its county assumes a magnitude that even force producer Greg Newkirk to directly intervene in the series’ subreddit with a disclaimer:

[...] I want to offer a gentle reminder to the general public to not go bothering the locals of Hellier [...] Stay off private property. Leave the locals alone if they don't want to talk to you about goblins or cults or magic rituals. Don't doxx people. This does not make you a good investigator, it makes you a jerk. If you want to adventure, be safe, be smart, and be respectful. (GregNewkirk, 2019b)

The *Hellier* fans’ visits to Hellier is a form of tourism and exploration which involves untouched woods and caves as much as private properties and the local inhabitants themselves, an unstructured and unregulated way. The amateur investigation, considered an integral part of the communal countercultural ‘call’, makes the fans

legitimised to follow their heroes' investigative steps by re-enacting their methodologies in situ. This action therefore responds to rules and discourses which are entirely decontextualised from the place, and that instead manifest forms of exertion of power in which the fans feel entitled to roam, to ask questions, to take pictures, and ultimately to imbue spaces and encounters with their expectations for weird feelings and experiences of synchronicities. The place is considered as hiding some paranormal secret that the investigator has the role to unveil, thanks to the trail of synchronicity they have been gifted with and which demonstrates their being "on the right path" (*Hellier*, 2019).

This constructs a different cartography of the land and of its spatial affordances, no more connected with the social, historical and cultural dynamics of the place but instead entirely founded on the feeling of place and the sense of wonder of the fan willing to finding new connections in a local reality entirely unknown to them. Local rules, costumes and social boundaries are therefore overwritten in the name of a search for the next synchronicity to happen. Private properties, forbidden areas or normed behaviours lose importance for the *Hellier*-initiated that *needs* to be allowed in, in order to fulfil their personal contribution for the 'change' that the collective ritual will bring. In this context, the unaware, uninterested or even unsettled local inhabitants are reified into witnesses, and their legitimate cautious and diffident response to the fans' intrusions in search for 'weird experiences' becomes a hint of either secrecy, complicity or conspiracy. Either way, the local individual is no more than an object of study, a potential bearer of the next synchronistical communication that needs to be 'squeezed out via seemingly innocent and 'transparent' questioning. And it is precisely a form of conspiratorial thinking what seems to emerge from the countercultural activity around *Hellier*. The 'weird' feeling of connection, of intentionality behind the experience of the eerie explored in the Tuner section is here transformed into a force, an instance of power to be exerted upon a land and its inhabitants, in search for proof and evidence not so much of the existence of paranormal phenomena in place but, according to the ethos of the *Hellier* investigation, of relationality itself, of a pure and simple sense of connection and direction.

The attuned 'listening' that was at the foundation of the whole methodology in *Hellier* becomes a performative attempt at forcing the occurrence of synchronicities, a

reification of the eerie atmosphere of the “weird vibe” of the place into a secret that must be concealed by inhabitants that seem a bit too normal, too tranquil, to be someone living in such a place that so *clearly* irradiates ‘high strangeness’ vibrations. What was initially an atmospheric and resonant relationality with the surroundings and its stories – a fundamental tenet of *Hellier*’s rejection of evidence-based investigations – is instead reified as the need for a tangible manifestation.

It is a process that, in different terms, has been explored throughout the detector sections of the thesis: in *The Stone Tape*, the attempt at finding the frequency to control and trigger the haunting phenomenon, and in the Philip Experiment, the territorialisation of the ghost as an energetic emanation of the mind. In this case, however, the shift assumes a further connotation. The discursive move operated by the fans and the creators alike points towards a form of conspiratorial thinking, in which an affective feeling of the eerie is instead interpreted as a deterministic, causal relationship. While the *Hellier* countercultural discourse is founded on the role of synchronicities – a process of transforming linguistic objects such as names, numbers or symbols into pure affective relationalities – it sometimes reverses its intentions into conspiracy: where, as an opposite move, pre-representational affective intensities are imbued with semiotic and linguistic meaning. In other words, perhaps oversimplifying for clarity purposes, on one side synchronicity as the transformation of language into affect; on the other, conspiracy as the morphing of affective intensities into language.

### **The counterculture of Atmospheric Forteanism between synchronicity and conspiracy**

The role of synchronicity in contemporary paranormal discourse goes beyond the sole case of *Hellier*. Moreover, the series should not be intended as the sole originator of the aforementioned countercultural tendency, but rather the catalyst of a broader and more pervasive milieu that can be traced running within occultural discourse in recent years. *Hellier* is thus a representative case of a form of challenge, transformation and reconfiguration not only the paranormal discourse but also of rationalist and deterministic modern views of reality. Some of the specificities documented in *Hellier* can in fact be found in other recent cases, whose comparative analysis unveils the fundamental terms of the counterculture:



- the construction of meaning through a focus of chance and synchronicity,
- the rejection of evidential support in lieu of a centrality of the felt,
- affect and atmospheric sensation as the central point of the paranormal experience,
- a feedback loop between online interaction and real-world exploration.

I call this countercultural milieu Atmospheric Forteanism. Atmospheric, for the strong focus on peripheral affective intensities in interactions with place, over entities and physical phenomena. And Forteanism, to refer to the Fortean researchers such as Keel and Vallée who, as seen in the *Hellier's* Antenna, effectively set the ground for this modern view of the paranormal. While beyond the scope of this research, other relevant case studies can be found carrying out a similar focus on synchronistical reading of material reality, as well as displaying a resonant interplay between place-based practices and online community echo chambers.

Two further case studies will be briefly introduced here, as ways to more thoroughly map the modes of the emerging counterculture here introduce. One is the recent mobile phone app Randonautica, which emphatically promises to facilitate potentially life-changing explorations of one's everyday surroundings, through a synchronicity-based mind-matter interaction influencing the random generation of geographical coordinate points (Lengfelder and Salcedo, 2021). From its release in 2019, the app maintained an active and involved online community of users sharing their experiences which, similarly to *Hellier*, seem to converge towards common synchronistical encounters. In the case of Randonautica as well, the shared synchronicities happening in between the online and the on-site are encouraged as evidences for a new challenge of hegemonic, mainstream understanding of material reality, assuming in this case as well a countercultural program similar to the one delineated in *Hellier*. In *Hellier* and Randonautica the practice is centred around the interpretation of synchronicities as a growing network of a-causal connections that are imbued with a feeling of intentionality, as if the 'phenomenon' itself was subtly guiding the investigator towards an initiatory discovery of the hidden nature of the real. As seen before, such way of reading reality can lead to an obsessive need for connection that arrives at assuming the form of conspiratorial thinking.

This is the point of interest of the second case here proposed: the infamous lore emerged online in 2013 around the unsolved death of Canadian tourist Elisa Lam in Los Angeles, in which an initially unexplainable tragedy triggered a storm of amateur investigations by online true crime communities that spread a wide network of alleged synchronicities between the case and urban legends, horror fiction, *creepypastas* and conspiracy theories, many of which centred around the supposed paranormally-charged hotel where the facts happened<sup>10</sup>. In this case as well, a synchronistical resonance between the online echo chamber and a specific real-world place is at the centre of the process, in this case related to a hotel situated in the middle of the Skid Row, a highly impoverished and ghettoised area of Los Angeles with a grim history of violence and drug addiction. In the case of Elisa Lam's conspiracy theories, the countercultural aspect emerges from the generation of an online community that – through practice in between online searches and on site ostension – openly challenged not only the official investigation by LAPD but also a voyeuristic understanding of socially-deprived areas, fictionalised as haunted places whose *evil agency* is able to corrupt the minds and bodies of the people inhabiting them:

I do believe it is evil, I do believe that's why these things have happened there. [...] That's what draws in these killers, the suicides (*Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel*, 2021)

The case of the online investigation around the death of Elisa Lam is an effective example of the pervasiveness of the concept of synchronicity as both discourse and practice in contemporary fringe culture, making it the crucial element of a paradigm of interpretation – or 'detection', according to the radio model – of affective modulations between history, events, lore and place. Moreover, it is a demonstration of how the creative and transformative potential of synchronicities – as advocated in *Reddit* and *Randonautica* – can instead bear the seed of conspiracy thinking, with real-world consequences of misinformation, social injustice and scapegoating. This approach to synchronicities, it can be said, reverses the process analysed in *Hellier* and *Randonautica* while, at the same time, being embedded within them. All three examples, in fact, conceptualise a practical use of synchronicity as a way to

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<sup>10</sup> For a comprehensive although unstructured overview of the many conspiratorial synchronicities related to the death of Elisa Lam, see (Vtm1000, 2013).

remodulate the conceptual and pragmatic resonances between affect – the pre-representational, the felt, the embodied – and language – the semiotic representation, the symbolic, the narrative.

Sometimes, the performative dynamics of attunement that lead to the sensation of synchronicity have the effect of deterritorialising the significance of words, images and narratives, transforming them into pure affective affordances to eerie relationships. On the contrary, in the cases in which the synchronicity assumes the form of conspiracy – synchronomysticism – what is at work is the opposite resonant process, in which affective and emotionally-charged sensations of connection, coming from a numinous aura of online coincidences, is given semantic and symbolic meaning. In other words, therefore, the practices of Atmospheric Forteanism can lead to two parallel and interconnected processes: on one side, a creative construction of a synchronistic reality in which language assumes an affective dimension, and on the other, the emergence of conspiratorial thinking in which, conversely, emerges from an affective feeling of relationality to be translated into (esoteric) language.

## 7. Conclusion

The principal aim of this thesis was to formulate a methodology to analyse contemporary discourse on paranormal experiences and practices of otherworldly communication, from realist and non-reductionist points of view. The concern was to define an approach to the field capable of tracing processes over representations – and affective modulations over objective phenomenologies – by shifting the focus from a visual-centred investigation to one based on listening ecologies and resonance-based dynamics.

Four main objectives directed the research. First, to investigate the material, discursive and symbolic role of sound and resonance in narratives and reports of contemporary paranormal experiences. Second, to rethink such experiences in terms of process, communication and affective interactions with and within the everyday. Third, to analyse in detail the affective and symbolic practices of haunted places and spaces. And fourth, to critically examine how paranormal experiences collectively circulate in contemporary Western culture. These objectives were specifically applied to three main case studies, considered representative of three fundamental instances of the paranormal episteme, and which presented a rich potential for intertextual connections and comparisons with other paranormal texts from both diachronic and synchronic perspectives.

The research demonstrated how a focus on resonant processes and resonance-based discourses is a valuable way to trace the modes of the paranormal experience. First, a material resonant dimension – often manifested and amplified through audio technologies – is central to the embodied and affective dynamics of the paranormal. In fact, sonic ecologies, acoustics, resonant vibrations and so on are often the trigger for the “questions of agency” (Fisher, 2017, p.61) that create the conditions for the paranormal to be experienced. Second, a metaphorical or symbolic conceptualisation of resonance is a recurring theme in paranormal discourse, resonance is in fact often employed as a way to understand, to make sense of, and to hypothesise on the rationality-defying experiences under examination. The paranormal, seems in this sense to be often interpreted as *behaving* resonantly, even when there are no physical

resonances involved in the experience, such as material vibrations, sounds or electromagnetic emissions that could have a role in distorting an ordinary perceptual sensorium.

This conclusions chapter will summarise the principal findings of the research. First, it will outline the main elements and empirical procedures of the resonance-based methodology defined, developed and tested throughout the research. A focus on the three main components of the Radio Sorcery model – Antenna, Tuner and Detector – will then be the occasion for a horizontal reading of the thesis: to pull the main conceptual threads emerged during the analysis of the three case studies into a cohesive presentation of the contemporary conceptualisation of the paranormal. This will lead to a further in-depth discussion of two specific aspects that recurrently appeared throughout the research: the role of technology in the paranormal experiences analysed, as well as the complex relationship between alleged real-life accounts and fictional narrativisation. Successively, a summary of the principal directions for further research will be presented. Finally, a personal consideration will bring these conclusions to a close, by reflecting on the broader role of research, and the position of the researcher within it.

## **7.1 Radio Sorcery as methodology**

The methodology that this thesis proposed is tripartite: Antenna, Tuner and Detector are to be considered three operational principles to guide three different but interrelated aspects of the case study under examination. While the analysis is carried out linearly, the three components should not be conceived as three *stages* of a pre-established progression, but rather three components of a whole processual engine. For this reason, conceptual leakages between the three and a general mobility of the analysis conducted in each section are a natural consequence of the methodological framework itself. As introduced throughout the research, the methodology here proposed is directed towards the identification and description of processes, of relationships, of interaction principles, rather than the comprehension of identities and representations. A successful application of the methodology is therefore one that

produces vectors, that proposes networks, and that identifies oscillations. In other words: one that engages with resonances.

The Antenna directs a broad contextual exploration across the potentially infinite spectrum of influences, inspirations and intertextual relations that the case study establishes with the broader discourse. What are the theories that the experiencers involved in the account mention and apply to their practices? What are the origins of the practices and methodologies found in the case study? What prior knowledge is necessary to position the case study within cultural, scientific and occultural frameworks? These are some of the questions that the Antenna asks, in order to fulfil its role of conceptual (and energetic) catalyst. These questions should be particularly directed towards sonic, vibratory and resonance-based discourses, in order to provide a broad understanding on how the dynamics of the paranormal experience are framed within a resonance-based processuality.

The Tuner is principally concerned with what creates the conditions for the experience to happen, either spontaneously or “fostered through deliberate strategies” (Bennett, 2001, p.4), thus paving the way for the sensation of the eerie. The Tuner starts from the understanding of how the everyday territory is expressed in the case study: what is the ordinary situation which will soon be unsettled. Successively, the analysis should be focused on the dynamics of deterritorialisation of the everyday: how – and never *why* – the experiencers reach and interact with different affordances, different affective intensities that undermine a rational and deterministic understanding of the environment they are immersed into, its fundamental rules and the agencies it hosts. Other questions here emerge. What practices frame – materially and or discursively – the territorial boundaries in order to welcome the potential of eerie agencies at work? What modes of performative attunements are employed to focus on the *listening to* the spatial surroundings? What practices are adopted, with what tools and technologies? What are the personal, group or collective dynamics? In this case as well, the interest is to trace the connections between sonic and acoustic phenomena and discursive resonances, in order to model the practice of the eerie from a non-representational, embodied and processual perspective.

The haunting should be conceived as a property of the territory, a network of material-discursive agencies that together define what kind of phenomena and feelings could be experienced. Moreover, the analysis should identify what emergent phenomena – i.e. ghosts or any other form of otherworldly agency – are born when the eerie process is in motion. The temporary, transitory and peripheral dynamics of haunting are here more important than the objective (and object-based) phenomenology of the reported experience. The experience itself, in fact, should be analysed from its sonic, audio and resonant dimensions, those that allow to trace continuums with the territory of the everyday, and to understand the forces at work, the shifting and transformations between the ordinary world and the supernatural one. Furthermore, a crucial component is the resonance between internal elements – psychology, belief, expectations, willingness to be enchanted, stories – and external ones – spaces, physical vibratory events, embodied feelings, chance encounters, and so on.

Eventually, the Detector completes the Radio Sorcery analysis by tracing how the experience identified in the Tuner is explained, made sense of, even debunked by the experiencers themselves and, importantly, by the broader collectivity. The Detector analyses the technical and discursive manipulations of the eerie questions of agency and how these are given definite representational shape through positive feedback resonations between affect and discourse, between nature and culture. In other words, the question is on how the reality-defying experience is territorialised within an established episteme – be it either occultural, scientific or fictional – or even how the experience itself contributes to the construction of a new paradigm of understanding of reality. Here, the discourses identified in the Antenna are brought back as theories, as hypotheses, or as theoretical challenges. Fundamental, in this sense, is an analysis of the role of technology and media as tools to measure, frame, capture and represent the experience and its phenomenologies.

Another important question that the Detector asks is what happens after the experience is recognised, what are the personal and collective implications of imbuing a place, a subject or an event with paranormal meaning. This brings to the ‘regenerative amplifier’ property of the Detector: the critical analysis of the collective, cultural implications of the diffusion and circulation of the case study. What forms of self-oscillations the case study produces? What further resonations it establishes with

occulture and the broader culture? This analysis can be particularly directed towards the real-world geographical, social, cultural implications of constructing haunted spaces and amplifying their eeriness through their mediated diffusion. In particular, the active role of narrativisation and fictionalisation should be taken into account, with an emphasis on the hyperstitional resonances that the case study produces, and how its stories feed back into the process to create new experiences and the construction of communities that, as seen, should be always analysed critically.

## **7.2 A horizontal reading of the thesis**

The methodology employed in the research produced a thesis whose structure allows for multiple reading trajectories. On one side, the three case studies' analyses can be read vertically, thus following the linear development of each chapter's text. The result of this reading is therefore an in-depth understanding of the Radio Sorcery mechanisms of each case study, tracing the main characteristics of the paranormal experience it expresses, as well as the main intertextual connections it establishes with occulture and culture at large. On the other side, the recurring structure of each chapter encourages a horizontal reading as well, zooming out from the specific case study to instead trace each specific component of the Radio Sorcery itself, by reading comparatively the three Antennas, the three Tuners and the three Detectors. This alternative mode pulls the principal threads of the whole research in order to arrive at a generalisation of the themes and modes encountered throughout the thesis, in a purposeful although inevitably partial theory on the contemporary modes of the paranormal. Here, the three radio components will be taken into considerations, summarising the resulting information extracted from each chapter.

### **Antenna**

When considering and comparing together the broader (oc)cultural fields from which the case studies stem, a first fundamental aspect that emerges is the historical dimension. In this sense, all three case studies manifested important diachronic vectors: principal characteristics of the paranormal milieu they instantiate is at once a



direct evolution of previous discourses – usually pertaining to the earlier history of paranormal research, from the second half of the nineteenth century to early 1900s – and the foundation for further, novel conceptualisations.

In *The Stone Tape* we find the formalisation of multiple, resonance-based approaches to haunting phenomena, all under the common overarching concept of the ‘stone tape’: these are speculations that accompany the whole history of psychical research, every time re-structuring their symbolic representations to adapt them to the scientific or technological paradigm of the time. In this sense, *The Stone Tape* can be contextualised within the Seventies’ development of digital technologies and telecommunications, as a fertile ground for further modern transformations. The fundamental commonality of all theories leading to the ‘stone tape theory’ is the metaphor of resonance: a way to model the subtle and peripheral modes of interaction which attunes bodies and environments. Moreover, the invisibility, immateriality and intrinsic ambiguity of the sonorous happening is the perfect expression of the complex dialectic between presence and absence, materiality and invisibility that is at the source of haunting.

Similar processes are at work in the case of the Philip Experiment as well, where sonic and vibratory-based forms of communication with disembodied agencies are remediated by the Toronto group from the history of Spiritualism, as well as the historical psychical research on telepathy and ESP. The historical continuity identified in the Philip Experiment’s Antenna is that of the tradition of the conceptualisation of disembodied paranormal entities as predominantly sonorous agencies, and the focus on non-verbal communication forms in which a-semantic noises and vibratory events become considered conduits for a ‘dark’ mediation in place between two ontologically opposed planes: the material world of the séance room, and the ethereal territory of the spirits.

Considering the shared temporality of the first two case studies, a fundamental diachronic process at work can be identified: the tendency to bring together the different trajectories of earlier occulture – spiritualism, psychical research, paranormal practices, and so on – and to remediate them as operative methodologies defining practices to foster the paranormal experience. The period between the late sixties and

the early seventies is an époque of theorisation and experimentation, often combining rigorous scientific aims – the parapsychology of Rhine (Rhine and Pratt, 1974) or the remote viewing research at SRI (Targ and Puthoff, 2005) – with more exploratory, apocryphal Fortean research, for instance in the case of Lethbridge (1961) or Keel (1970). Technology intervenes as aid and catalyst for the application of such methodologies, often in the form of pseudo-scientific measurement devices. And thus, we have the wide use of radios in EVP experiments, the adoption of electrical devices and audiovisual media in the parapsychology laboratory, and even the use of the nascent internet networking experiments (Vallée, 1988).

The *Stone Tape* and the Philip Experiments Antennas lie the ground for the third case study. In *Hellier*, all the tendencies typical of the early seventies' occultural paradigm come together under the umbrella of Forteanism, together with a programmatic agnostic conceptualisation of the paranormal that considers every instance of occulture as different, representational manifestation of the same all-encompassing 'Phenomenon'. The spectrum of signals that interacts with the antenna in *Hellier* is so expansive and multifaceted that most of the occultural tropes are at least mentioned: new age, magick, parapsychology, remote viewing, conspiratorial thinking, American Fortean lore, new ufology, cryptozoology, renegade pseudo-science, and so on. What ties together this discursive patchwork is the practice of paranormal investigation, that with its combination of desk-based reading, online search and on-site exploration is able to continuously reconfigure a methodology which welcomes disparate practices in a cohesive whole: from the hypnosis simulation of alien abduction to tarot reading, from natural magic to ghost box radio sessions.

A further element recurring throughout of the Antennas is more related to a synchronic dimension of the paranormal discourse: the strong and complex connection between occulture and technology. The preoccupation on the communicative dynamics of the paranormal phenomena that all three case studies portray, in fact, establishes complex relationships with their time's technology and media paradigms. The supernatural in *The Stone Tape* and the Philip Experiment, in fact, can be seen as symbolic mode of understanding of the role of technology and mediation itself during a crucial historical period of shifting from the industrial to the information age (Castells, 2011). In this context, traditional spirit communication becomes a speculation on wireless mediation;

phenomena of haunting unveil the implications of data archive and storage; the idea of telepathy mirrors the behaviour of digital networked systems. Furthermore, in the case of *Hellier*, the experience of synchronicity represents an expression of the circulation of information within the contemporary mediascape.

What creates the epistemological conditions for this post-modern approach is the discursive process of the synchronicity. As a fundamental concept recurring within sixties and seventies' occulture, synchronicity fundamentally shifts the focus from the search for objective result to the journey process itself, with movements, affects and atmospheric feelings becoming the principal manifestation of the paranormal phenomenon. The *Hellier* antenna introduced the fundamental role of synchronicity as another element of diachronic continuity within the history of occulture, that nowadays finds particularly strong application via the means of digital online technologies. It is online, in fact, that synchronicity assumes either the form of community of practices centred around creative explorations of the everyday, or the formulation of echo chambers where conspiratorial thinking strives.

To conclude, the antenna in the crystal radio set generates an electrical current within its conductive material that provides the energy for the whole passive circuit. This broadband energy is composed of the myriads of signals – human broadcasts, technological interferences, natural electromagnetic phenomena, maybe even modulations from disembodied spirits – that compose the radio AM spectrum. Correspondingly, the three Antenna sections of the research provided a wide spectrum of discourses, theories, stories and practices which all contributed as background to the production of the paranormal experience described in the three case studies. This noisy, modulated energy is fed into the tuner, which has the task to bottleneck the flow to a specific channel, isolating a single, precise frequency. And it is from this newly constructed communicative channel that a message is hoped to be received. Once tuned to the correct frequency, the radio receiver only has to wait, and to *listen*.

## **Tuner**

As described in the methodology chapter, the Tuner section provides information on the modes, methods and practices for the creation of specific communication channels

through which the paranormal can be experienced. This process involves an attunement to particular properties of place, of the situation or of the event, in order to create the conditions for the sensation of the eerie to happen. In this sense, the tuner traces processes and practices that reconfigure the territorial boundaries of the everyday setting from which the case study begins, analysing how new affordances, new agencies and new interactions are produced.

The sonic and the resonant has been identified once again as crucial components of processes that the tuner analyses. Through sonic interactions, in fact, invisible affective relationalities at a distance arrive at subverting taken for granted conceptualisations of presence and absence, towards the feeling of a transitory materiality which is unachievable in visual form. However, the point here is not an absolute polarisation of the primacy of listening against vision, but rather the realisation that the sonic eerie often prepares for a phenomenological experience which tends to defy the rational, deterministic rules that are fostered by a “retinal logic of separation” (Barbanti, 2020, p.44, translation mine). In this sense, visually-centred concepts such as position, dimension, perspective and even objectivity are fundamentally undermined, towards a resonance-based modality that centres the experience on relationships and embodied interactions. In this sense even purely visual paranormal experiences – such as UFO sightings or ghostly apparitions, for instance – assume a form of *resonance-like* quality as they tend to defy the aforementioned foundational affordances of the eye. These occurrences, instead, are imbued with a sense of intentionality, an attunement with the surroundings, a resonance between subjective psychological states and external phenomenologies, that makes them fundamentally relational, oscillatory, sonic-like.

The Tuner section in each chapter, in different ways, proposed representative modes of reaching and inhabiting a temporary haunted territory, through the construction an experiential apparatus which resonates at specific eerie frequencies. As identified multiple times, this process happens through forms of material-discursive attunements oriented towards the opening of specific communication channels. A first fundamental parameter that emerged is the spatial dimension of the paranormal. In *The Stone Tape*, the haunted space is essentially a physical space, and the agency that haunts is the result of specific configurations of the space itself: dimensions, materials, chemical

composition of the stones, surfaces, objects. The experience of the haunting is therefore strictly connected to the physical resonances with which the experiencer interacts, from an embodied perspective. These oscillations assume the form of reverberation and echoes from different energy sources: from the sonic modulations of the room's acoustics to the postulated psychical energy irradiated by the room's stones.

In the Philip Experiment, the haunted territory is a performative space, a temporary and spatially-contained area of the séance. It is generated by the regular meetings of the group and their recursive, circular practices of performatively drawing the borders of a haunted territory within which they are able to experience eerie communications with the artificial ghost. The tuning process here involves the specific temporal, rhythmical punctuation of the performance, the ouroboric cycles of action and interaction that organise the performance of a two-way communication in place.

*Hellier* then borrows elements from both the preceding: the spontaneous interactions with physical spaces and their amplification through specific group practices, involving resonance-based processes and resonant technological devices. However, *Hellier* develops a further aspect: that of the resonance between the onsite investigation – made of affective intensities, felt sensations of place – and the broader paranormal lore, with its myths, its representations and its practices. The eerie is fostered and amplified through the use of audio and vibratory technologies that establish a continuum between the everyday territory of the rural Kentucky and the supernatural currents that are said to be dwelling in the peripheries of place. The haunting is in the case of *Hellier* a cultural space: they do not search for physical evidence of supernatural entities, but rather a synchronistical connection to the paranormal lore that is primarily felt as a 'weird vibe' and as a feeling of intentional connectedness between seemingly divergent phenomena.

This leads to another recurring theme in the tuner analysis: the rejection of an absolute separation between natural and supernatural, where the paranormal phenomenon is instead conceived as inhabiting an oscillatory continuum between those two poles. *The Stone Tape* displays a dramaturgy of physical acoustics that ontologically and hauntologically connects natural and supernatural worlds. A tight connection with the

everyday is present also in the Philip Experiment, in which the members openly reject any traditional idea of mediumship, instead conducting séances among common individuals within the homely boundaries of a living room. *Hellier* too distances itself from a conceptualisation of the paranormal as an extraordinary Other, as their investigative methodology is instead founded on developing an attuned attention to often trivial and mundane particulars of minor places.

This brings to a fundamental difference between the approach that is here being investigated and the classical Torodovian movement of the fantastic as a narratological forking path between natural and supernatural. It is a view which is shared by Fisher (2017) as well, who conceives the eerie as a transitory state which dissipates whenever either a rational or a paranormal explanation of the experienced phenomena is found. In my view, instead, an analysis of such experiences benefits from the conceptualisation of natural and supernatural as two poles of an oscillation, indeed a resonance, instead of a dualistic separation: not a forking path, but a tuning fork. It does not surprise, then, that an embodied dimension of listening ecologies make the sonic the fertile ground where the paranormal agency manifests itself. This happens through the steady tones of rooms architectural acoustics, through the felt vibrations of a tipping table, and in the natural sonic phenomena and acoustic atmospheres, all of which become charged with agency and communicative intentionality.

To conclude, the tuner sections seem to all lead towards a fundamental finding. It could be said that the haunting itself is a property of the apparatus of attunement set up by the experiencers, whether spontaneously – as in *The Stone Tape* – or by practice – in the Philip Experiment - or through a combination of discovery and construction, as demonstrated in *Hellier*. The ghost at the output of the Tuner, in this sense, is not (yet) an entity, but an emergent phenomenon of the recursive interaction with the haunting properties of space. The ghost is a pure oscillation, an intensity which is felt as the emergent phenomenon of the particular experiential apparatus set up in the temporary haunted space. The paranormal that passes through the tuner *is* a sensation of agency, in the same way the background noise heard coming from the radio receiver does not bear a message to be deciphered but ‘only’ the realisation that there is a communication channel, that an incoming sound *could* be a message. A haunting is a

property of a particular experiential system, and the ghost its emergent phenomenon of interaction.

## Detector

The chaotic, deterritorialised signal arriving from the tuner is *rectified* by the Detector. An interpretative mode is applied to it: it gets de-composed, dissected in its internal information, in order to make it discernible not just for the human ear but for the human *mind*. It is a semiotic manipulation of a phenomenon to decrypt its internal meaning. While the Tuner is the material-discursive creation of the conditions for a message, the Detector identifies a hermeneutical process of extracting and interpreting meaning from a noise signal that *could* contain a message. It is, therefore, a territorialising process, a semiotic manipulation of the materials of the experience of the eerie, in order to answer the still open question of agency (Fisher, 2017) by coagulating the affective intensities registered in the tuner into established discursive or narrative boundaries, to make it meaningful, understandable and, most importantly, shareable. This creation of a new territory – thus recontextualising the taken for granted episteme to welcome the possibility of the paranormal experience – is found in the mythmaking practice of *Hellier*, in the reframing of spiritualism within the hypothesis of ESP in the Philip Experiment, and in *The Stone Tape*'s attempts at theorising haunting by controlling still unrevealed energetic processes. Moreover, it is at the level of the detector that the experience is given a shape, an image and a story: the emergent phenomenon of communication becomes a ghost, a cryptid, an extraterrestrial, a hallucination, a hoax.

An important historical dimension can be found in the context of the Detector as well. *The Stone Tape*'s and the Philip Experiment's Detectors, in fact, exemplify a tendency of their times to recontextualise, to 'reinvent' the spectral, by taking Victorian and nineteenth century ideas of the supernatural and to transform the ghost either as recording, or as an emergent phenomenon of a telepathic transmission network. Occulture and paranormal research therefore adapts to the profound change of paradigm towards the information age, as Erik Davis has effectively demonstrated in his research on American 70's occulture and its engagement with the concept of networks (Davis, 2019). In this context, radio telecommunication becomes the model

to understand – and at the same time to practice – experiences that the old nineteenth century's ideas of the ether or of the supernatural properties of magnetism are not anymore fit to explain. The interpretation of paranormal agencies is therefore driven by their need to be understood as communicative endeavours: there *must* be a process of mediation and transmission at work, and thus a carrier signal must exist as well.

*Hellier* once again internalises the other two case studies' tendencies while, at the same time, developing them further. Here, the dreams and imaginations of a paranormal network is realised through a remediation of the concept of synchronicity applied to the digital communication of internet and social media. The interaction between the production crew and the fans, in a feedback process between online and on site, becomes the principal source of paranormal phenomena itself: a paranormal as imbued with relationality and communication. The internet itself becomes the Detector of the Radio Sorcery process: a synchronicity-machine, a catalyst for eerie affects and a hyperstitional amplifier. As it has been analysed, one of the major effects of this self-oscillating process is that the experience tends to extend beyond the small circle of the *Hellier* investigators, instead producing and distributing new meanings on the investigated place itself.

### **The role of technology**

One of the major aspects found in the Detecting processes is the complex role of technology and the use of media. Electronic devices and scientific instrumentation have in fact a crucial importance in the interpretative processes set in practice in the three case studies, either as devices to measure external phenomena, as catalysts for the experience, or as discursive models used to metaphorise the paranormal process itself. *The Stone Tape* represents a recurrent approach in psychical research to the use of resonance-based technology – tone generators, analysis of acoustics, etc. – as a way to *measure*, to frame the experience within rationally-acceptable processes. The affective, atmospheric signal received from the Tuner thus becomes a physical oscillation which however necessarily remains at the level of pure theoretical speculation. Something similar happens in the Philip Experiment: the researchers analyse recordings of the raps to demonstrate, at the same time, the extra-ordinary



quality phenomena obtained and their entirely physical, scientifically explainable nature. These are all territorialising ordering attempts, ways of resolving the fundamental paradox of an experience that feels at once internal and external, objective and subjective. In other words, to move from a resonance-like interpretation of the phenomenon to an objective representation of a waveformed energy at work.

In agential realist perspective, these experimental processes are never only explanatory but always productive of the phenomena that are detected. The detector process thus operates an “agential cut” (Barad, 2007, p.131) between what is inside and what is outside, fixing the process of the paranormal in a snapshot where clearly distinct agents and phenomena are represented, often assuming coherent visual imagery. It is, for instance, the case of the sound analysis operated in the Philip Experiment, where the feeling of intentional vibration that is so often reported by the group as one of the principal source of the sensation of communication with Philip is analysed and dissected from a visual point of view, in a reductionist move that from the sound event shifts towards the sonic object and eventually into a *shape*, a form. The paranormal phenomenon is therefore objectified – and made measurable, quantifiable – in order to fully subjectify the human agency. In this sense, the Detector becomes a process of reterritorialising the centrality of the human as the fundamental bearer of agency and intelligence, and to safely keep outside the territory all the *other*, subtler and paradoxical agencies that could challenge this hierarchical assumption: reverbs, movements, coincidences, ghosts.

However, these territorialising processes can operate the opposite move as well: the creation of a practice to *produce* the paranormal experience by transforming perfectly normal and ordinary phenomena into eerie-imbued messages. It is the case of *Hellier*, where the apparatus of experimentation utilises resonances, resonant technologies and resonance-based performances to coagulate the affective sensations and ‘vibes’ of place in synchronistic connections and relationships. This has the effect of constructing a new semiotic of the ‘weird’, and a new everyday territory in which paranormal agencies live and dwell in the forms of vibes, feelings, and unexpected connections. This practice is therefore the source of the ‘ethical’ program that *Hellier* displays during the second season, the drive to the countercultural call that arrives at assuming elements of conspiratorial thinking.

## The role of fiction

One of the main territorialising forces that is found in the Detector section is the process of narrativisation of the experience, and ultimately its fictionalisation: *The Stone Tape* is a text that represents in fictional form real-world psychical research theories as well as archetypical haunting accounts, the Philip Experiment is a creation of a fictional ghost to demonstrate the constructivist nature of spiritualist phenomena, and *Hellier* utilises the genre of the entertainment paranormal documentary to express and share a view of the paranormal and of reality at large. Fictionalisation has a crucial role in framing the paranormal experience within collectively-agreeable structures and representations. It also contributes to the experience's circulation, diffusing specific ideas and representations of the paranormal and connecting them to lore of a place, as seen with the mythmaking process carried out by the *Hellier* crew. Therefore, in this case fiction does not merely – or not only – mean fakeness, or fabrication:

it is no longer adequate to consider fiction to be on the side of the false, the fake or the imaginary. It can be considered to belong to the artificial, once we understand [...] that the Real—far from being opposed to the artificial, is composed of it (Fisher, 2018, p.156)

This is particularly true with respect to a field – that of the paranormal experience – which is imbued at every stage of its development with stories, traditions, lore and imaginations of how the haunting should look and feel like and how it should behave while interacting with the experiencer. Fiction resonates with paranormal experiences in recursive relationships: it is at the same time cause and consequence, inspiration and representation. In the context of the paranormal, in fact, the process of Radio Sorcery does not establish any absolutist separation between fiction and reality, which instead mutually resonate in a feedback process of recursive causality and influence.

In a recent Instagram story, *Hellier* director Karl Pfeiffer wrote: “Stories matter, the way we tell stories matter”. This could be interpreted in two ways. First, that in the context of *Hellier*, stories are important and, maybe, that to tell an engaging and enchanting story of ‘high weirdness’ is more effective than demonstrating hard evidence of the

presence of the supernatural. Second, it could literally mean that paranormal stories *matter*: that telling a story such as the *Hellier* one has the effect of mattering, of bringing to reality the story itself. As historian of religions Kripal declares, the paranormal often displays inherent narrative and mythical dynamics (Kripal, 2010, p.27).

Indeed, it can be clearly demonstrated how this is true in the context of *Hellier* and the real-world effects it has in the fans and in the places it portrays. There are, in other words, specific modes of ‘detecting’ of the paranormal experience that makes it *bleed* into material reality, through the medium of turning chance and natural events into synchronistic connections and feeling of a secret reality hidden in mundane symbols. It is a hyperstitional movement, an element of culture that makes itself real (CCRU and OrphanDrift, 1999), a “positive feedback circuit including culture as a component. It can be defined as the experimental (techno-)science of self-fulfilling prophecies” (Land and Carstens, 2009).

Art-research collective AUDINT identifies a close correlation between hyperstitional formations and sonic, unsonic and vibratory processes (Goodman, Heys and Ikoniadou, 2019). Once again, the resonant seem to have an important role in these fringe cultural modulations as well. The sonic hyperstition is a central theme in the Philip Experiment, where a fictional ghost is brought to life – becoming ‘real’ in its perceived autonomous intelligence – through reterritorialisations of natural sonic and vibratory phenomena. And this is particularly important in *Hellier*, of course, where the fictionalisation intrinsic in the entertainment documentary form produces real world effects, affects and experiences, together with the construction of a community of practice that arrives at assuming the form of a counterculture based on a resonant interpretation of life. In this case, discursive resonances between places, lore and events are made self-oscillating through online circulation, producing positive feedback processes that amplify the sensation of synchronicity, by transforming a subtle feeling into a belief of connectedness between all things, beyond rationality and determinism. As seen, this can foster a new attentiveness to the surroundings, a heightened sense of relationality, when the synchronicity imbues signs and symbols with affective intensity. However, it can instead bring towards the obsessive search for secret manoeuvres of conspiracy and control, when the synchronicity instead

translates purely affective feelings of eeriness into structured, linguistic frameworks that need to be decrypted.

### 7.3 Further research

Multiple paths for further research are opened at the end of this thesis. Among the many possible extensions of the theoretical and the methodological program of this research, a more in-depth study of the modes and the forms of the Atmospheric Forteanism – the synchronicity-based counterculture found in the analysis of *Hellier* – is the richest and the most urgent one. In this sense, I am already conducting further study in this sense – with the comparative work on *Hellier*, *Randonautica* and the online conspiratorial echo chamber around the synchronistical lore of the crime case of Elisa Lam – as extensions of the understanding of the shape of the countercultural drive that I argue is emerging in recent years. Moreover, I have conducted additional research on the specific sonic and resonant processes connected to contemporary paranormal practices, in a paper focused on the intersections between Electronic Voice Phenomena methodologies and experimental sonic arts (Polato, 2025).

A first step towards an extension of the work carried out so far is the incorporation of fieldwork research in the proposed methodology. In this case, the Radio Sorcery model would be applied to data collected from interviews and, in particular, from an investigation focused on identifying localised communities of practice that manifest a countercultural program comparable to the one manifested in *Hellier*. One fruitful example is the community of enthusiasts, practitioners and experiencers gravitating around the so-called ‘Tod UFO Meet’, a monthly gathering focused on paranormal experiences, emerged in the last few years in the town of Todmorden, UK (Mistlin, 2021), one of the paranormal epicentres of the country (Martin, 2022; Moran, 2022) even termed “Britain’s answer to Roswell” (Gosling, 2022).

This should involve online communities as well, in order to trace their material-discursive resonances with physical geographies. This approach could prove fruitful in providing new understanding of the more operative and lived dynamics of the

countercultural dimension of the paranormal, with a detailed account of the modes and discourses of more localised and specific instances. In this case, it would be useful to incorporate, aside from the Radio Sorcery methodology, more traditional research methods pertaining to social sciences and cultural geography, such as ethnographic research and critical discourse analysis, to deepen the understanding of the position of paranormal practice within sociopolitical frameworks and instances of power.

Related to a fieldwork approach, an important addition to the methodology would be to conduct audio field recordings of the places connected with the experiences of haunting under examination. This could be carried out by recording the ambiance – and possibly also more technical data such as impulse response and general acoustics of the spaces – in order to compare them with the representations provided by texts, interview materials and artistic representations. Moreover, an observation of occultural practices in situ could be enriched by audio recordings through which to obtain useful data on how the practices directly engage within the acoustic environment, and on what ecological sonic interactions are specifically fostered. This type of research could be directed particularly towards a consideration that has been outlined in *The Stone Tape* and the *Hellier* chapters, about the material-discursive relationships between acoustics and a sociocultural dimension of the history of place. In the chapters, I have identified a hauntological potential of acoustic perceptions and ecologies of listening to bring forward past functions, uses and histories of places from embodied and affective experiential positions, producing novel interpretations of under-researched collective spaces of trauma and grief.

Regarding the possible extensions of the research in the field of social studies, an investigation on the gendered dimension of the paranormal discourse would be highly relevant, as it already emerged in every one of the three case studies. In the first, the sensitive character Jill is portrayed in *The Stone Tape* as a genius but highly emotional female individual, perpetuating the Victorian stereotype of the female body as finely attuned to the supernatural. In the second, the background story produced during the Philip Experiment displays a sexist foundation, and essentialist stereotypes of masculinity and femininity emerge from the group's writings about the different sonic qualities of spirit raps, considered strong in the case of Philip and soft and gentle in the case of the other, female artificial ghost briefly mentioned, Lilith. From the point of

view of *Hellier* too, a useful investigation on the contemporary remediations of witchcraft and natural magic by female practitioners – such as crew member and producer Dana Newkirk – should be carried out. It would be interesting, in this sense, to investigate how contemporary paranormal entertainment shows – as well as online influencers – explore themes such as gender, identity and representation from an occultural point of view.

Furthermore, the research should be extended to non-western and non-white cultures, challenging the Radio Sorcery methodology with respect to traditions that can sometimes be incompatible to a Western conceptualisation of the paranormal. Moreover, further research recognising the consequences of the extremely white-centric connotations of contemporary occulture should be conducted. This would assume a particular urgency considering the already identified closeness between occulture and conspiratorial thinking, the latter of which is often imbued with dangerous anti-democratic discourse, xenophobia and white supremacism. In this sense, the methodology of Radio Sorcery could potentially be adapted to understand certain discursive processes happening within online extremist communities. More generally, this could lead to an analysis of the connections between the novel synchronicity-culture and the potential weaponisation of Radio Sorcery mechanisms to perpetuate inequality, disinformation and power exertion towards marginalised groups.



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