

SPIRIT TRACKS

warren ellis



O. SUNK HEAD

Pirate television used to be a science fiction signifier. MAX HEADROOM, for instance. Its overwhelming mediapocalyptic televisionscape may kindly be considered prescient, if not obvious, but one of its more charming elements was the pirate tv station Big Time, run from a converted Winnebago by ancient British punk Blank Reg. The first MAX HEADROOM tv film, aired in 1987, was subtitled 20 MINUTES INTO THE FUTURE. Pirate television was already 22 years old. The first pirate television broadcast that I know of was transmitted from Sunk Head, an illegally-occupied Sea Fort off the coast of Essex.

On 9 November 1965, at around 4.20 in the morning, a hundred-foot aerial atop the four-storey-high Sunk Head tower chucked a signal across eleven miles of water and fourteen miles inland. The broadcast was reportedly a still image, ghostly and monochrome: a white globe with a star and two Ts atop it, and the name of the nascent pirate tv station: Tower TV.

Sometimes I think that the real world was always moving faster than science fiction: it's just that back then the real future was broadcasting at 4.20 in the bloody morning and no-one was around to see it.

All written content by Warren Ellis, originally appearing at <http://warrenellis.com> from 15 May to 20 May 2011.

Imagery on pages one, thirty, & thirty-two comes from Brian Wood's PUBLIC/DOMAIN 2, released in 2009.

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1. SPIRIT TRACKS

This is a very short book being written in several times at once. I'm writing it in May of 2011, but I'm also writing it in January 2011. In January 2011, it is taking the form of a talk. I'm rewriting it in February 2011, just before giving the talk, in Berlin. Bits of it are being written in 2010, and at those points I have no idea that they're part of any kind of book.

The skeleton is the keynote talk I gave at a conference about the emergent digital nature of cities. Everything else is... everything else I was interested in at the time. It is a book about how everything is electric. It is also a book about cities, and a book about broadcasting, and a book about science fiction. And it is a book about ghosts.

The chances are good that it will make no sense at all.

Sunk Head, by the way, was blown up with more than two tons of plastic explosive in 1967. The light and heat from the blast could be seen and felt more than fourteen miles away.

2. 1966 AND ALL THAT

It's also 1966, as I write this in 2011. In 1966, Delia Derbyshire pays for Pink Floyd's taxi as they visit her at the BBC Radiophonic Workshop. Pink Floyd's Syd Barrett is months away from going mad. Philip K Dick publishes *NOW WAIT FOR LAST YEAR*. (Last year was the pirate TV broadcast from Sunk Head, in international waters.) Yoko Ono is months away from being naked on Delia Derbyshire's floor for no particular reason. The *INTERNATIONAL TIMES* recently commenced publication, launching at a Pink Floyd gig. (Radio Tower is now broadcasting spottily from Sunk Head.) The film *THE WITCHES*, written by Nigel Kneale, has been released. And issue 7 of radical architecture magazine *ARCHIGRAM* is published, under the theme of "beyond architecture," packaged with a resistor, to denote, in the words of Archigram member Dennis Crompton, the "end of the Faraday era, if you like, where the ways of processing electrons were through valves and various devices that

were based on late Nineteenth century discoveries."

Crompton goes on to describe one piece of the magazine, as written by Warren Chalk: "it's a letter from Warren to David about ghosts and phantoms. And again, it's Warren thinking out loud, as you might say, thinking that ghosts are his memories of the past in architectural design and music and social events, and the phantoms are from the future."



3. REPORT ON THE CONSTRUCTION OF SITUATIONS

1966. University of Strasbourg Student Union funds are lifted by Situationist sympathisers to print Andre Bertrand's short comic RETURN OF THE DURUTTI COLUMN, which used stills from Hollywood movies in a process then termed detournement: familiar materials recontextualised in opposition (or at strange angles) to their original intent. This is something so common on the internet now that most people may not know there's a word for it. It became "culture jamming," and now it's simply the way we piss about on the net and do our artistic business. It's one of the keys to cultural atemporality – everything is detourned, everything is collage, everything needs prior art. Everything is ghostly fabric. The only useful Google hit I can find for Andre Bertrand today is, funnily enough, the Wikipedia page for an attorney who specialises in copyright law.

(The Student Union's next stunt is to release a polemic notable for praising Spies For Peace. The British anti-war group The Committee Of 100 was affiliated with Spies For Peace. Comics writer Grant Morrison's father did prison time as a member of the Committee. Committee-related demonstrations against Greek royalty visiting London in 1963 led to the arrest of, among others, comics artist Donald Room (whom I knew in the 1980s as a sweet and lovely illustrator of kids' comic strips – it was quite a shock when I later discovered him doing anarchist comics). Donald was nicked and framed by one Det. Sergeant Harold Challenor, who was later found to have been a functioning paranoid schizophrenic since approximately 1944.)

4. RAUDIVE

1966: and Dr Konstantin Raudive is listening to the radio. He is inside a Radio Frequency (RF)-screened laboratory. He is hunched over the radio, a microphone, and a tape recorder, listening intently to a dead frequency in the medium band. He is listening for the voices of ghosts. Electronic Voice Phenomena: the idea that the dead are speaking to us through radio, somewhere down deep in the medium wave, around 29 megacycles.

Today, EVP is more commonly termed Instrumental Trans-Communication by the ghost hunters of the world: informational traffic between the spirit world and any electronic device. Including, of course, networked digital devices.

This is all going somewhere. Really.

5. A BRIEF PAUSE IN 1978

An aside, from 1978: Tony Wilson and Alan Erasmus, not quite yet having formed Factory Records in Manchester, put together a band out of bits of other local bands. Wilson would have been entirely aware that that the title RETURN OF THE DURUTTI COLUMN deliberately misspells the name of Spanish anarchist Buenaventura Durruti, but names the band The Durutti Column. Mostly, I suspect, so he can call the first album RETURN OF THE DURUTTI COLUMN. A well-read man, Wilson employs another Situationist notion, and sells the record in a sleeve made of sandpaper, so that it will slowly destroy the other records in the owner's collection.

6. GOOD FROM STRONTIUM

February 2011, Berlin: I'm standing on a stage, a comics writer in front of a room full of digital-cities people who don't really know who I am or what I'm doing there, and I'm saying this:

I'm mostly a science fiction writer. Steven Shaviro, in his book *CONNECTED*, talks a bit about the Russian sf novel *ROADSIDE PICNIC*, saying that it, like all science fiction, actually exists to cast a shadow over the present.

He says of science fiction, "It shows us how profoundly haunted we are by what has not yet happened."

In the specific case of *Roadside Picnic* and Tarkovsky's film adaptation *STALKER*, what had not happened yet was the Chernobyl disaster. The alien impact region called *The Zone* in *STALKER* has crossed over into reality to become Chernobyl's actual *Zone Of Alienation*, and the guides who take the curious into it call themselves *Stalkers*. In 2007, a videogame called *S.T.A.L.K.E.R*

explicitly associates *Roadside Picnic* and *STALKER* with Chernobyl and *The Zone Of Alienation*, to the point where photography and footage of *The Zone Of Alienation* became the basis for the visual depiction of *The Zone*.

According to a 2003 report, there are two "cafes" inside the *Zone* that serve vodka described as "good from strontium." The report, preserved on a yabloko.ru message board, also notes:

Bread and vodka remained as "currency" for Chernobyl till now, where long ago is built its own, radiation communism

Which I mention purely because I love the term "radiation communism."

And I'm reminded of the ongoing experiments in particle physics that currently seem to indicate that the present is influenced by the future, where entangled photons tell each other what's going to happen before it happens.

7. THE UNEXPLAINED

But I'm here to talk about the haunting. I'm here to talk about the ghosts.

Ghost hunters have conferences like this, you know. I always wanted to go to one, when I was younger. When I was a kid, when I could find the money, I'd collect magazines about ghosts, UFOs, paranormal phenomena and weird things like photos of the electromagnetic fields humans produce. The one I remember best was called *The Unexplained*, a weekly "partwork" that was supposed to build into a huge library of the numinous and strange. I couldn't afford them all, and in the end had to give up buying them entirely. But I treasured my little trove of these thin slivers of paper broadcast from (in my 12-year-old-head) some hidden laboratory where they tapped into the secret radio of the world and knew everything about everything weird. I'd stare at the Kirlian photographs of the crackling, electrical human aura, and pick over the pictures of the mad, mushroom-like UFOs photographed by George Adamski. Which were later discovered to have been made out of hubcaps. But still.

8. NOSTALGIA FOR RUST

(In the 90s, when I first had disposable income, I bought a hardbound library edition of the entire run of *The Unexplained*. And then the internet happened, and I didn't really need it any more. But there was a pleasure, a feeling of completion like filling a hole in the road about paging through those books, all the things my younger self didn't get to read. Some jumbled form of nostalgia, a reconfiguration of the word's root terms of "returning home" and "ache.")

(I've never trusted nostalgia.)

Nostalgia: Jack Schulze, who as part of the design unit BERG operates in an ill-defined but future-facing post-industrial space, is telling me (I think in 2009 — there was beer involved) of a meeting he was called to with a terrestrial network television broadcaster. He does lots of interesting work with lots of interesting people, in a range of digital and postdigital fields. But he was really kind of antsy about this meeting. He said to me: "Television? Broadcasting? That's, like aerials and shit. Pylons and towers. Huge fucking chunks of rusting metal." The strong implication was that he felt he was being drafted into a meeting about manual farming machinery. Having an iPhone meant that he really shouldn't have to know about things like oxen and ploughshares. Jack had no nostalgia for all that. It was all ghosts and rust to him. (I did mention there was beer involved.)

All this was in pursuit of a conversation about television,

specifically British terrestrial tv and "common culture" (which is eight million people watching *DOCTOR WHO* and talking about it the next day, put reductively) (the final *QUATERMASS* serial averaged 11 million viewers and that number was considered soft), and why I want to write some. Why, in essence, I want to traffic with the likes of great rusting broadcast towers.

And I said to him, "I want to do some television before it, as we know it now, goes away. If only just to try it and feel what it's like."

Which is, I'll allow, like taking a writing holiday in Portmeiron because Noel Coward wrote there, or working on a Smith-Corona because it has mythic resonance. But, you know, it might be instructive to sit in Dennis Potter's chair for a while. Just as I once sat at a desk Arthur Conan Doyle once wrote at. It's somehow quixotic. Tilting at ghosts.

It's 1978. I'm at my grandmother's house in Shoebury. The TV picture is all fucked up. My dad says,

"the gasometers must be high.

"The picture's ghosting."



9. GHOSTED IMAGE

It's 1925. A ghosted image appears on John Logie Baird's small, flickering test screen. A spectral, actually quite disturbing face grinning out through the swirling ether of the electronic beyond. Stooky Bill.

First he broadcast the white-faced puppet Stooky Bill — a "stookie," in Glaswegian, is a plaster cast — and then grabbed a kid called Bill Taynton and put him in front of the machine. I like to think that Taynton got a look at Stooky Bill and felt a shot of the Fear, because the light and heat of the machine had blasted it into a cracked yellow ember of its former self. Perhaps the master of the machine, John Logie Baird himself, thought of the day when the Trinidadians of the Santa Cruz Valley thought him a white Obeahman and attempted a terrified assault on his house of strange lights. Perhaps he thought of the night he blacked out Glasgow while trying to make a diamond with electricity.

John Logie Baird put Taynton in front of the machine, the spin of his altered Nipkow Disc growling in the small hot room, and worked his mechanical magic, making him the first man broadcast on television.

When Baird tried to tell the editor at the Daily Express newspaper what he'd done, the hack got the Fear and hissed to his staff: "He says he's got a machine for seeing by wireless. Watch him — he may have a razor on him."

10. WE WANT YOUR MACHINES

But here's a thing about the rust of broadcasting. Something Russell Davies, who works in what he termed the post-digital space, said a while back:

"We have broken your business, now we want your machines."

What Russell and his crew at Really Interesting Group (who share office space with BERG in a Scrutton Street gulag now called The BRIG) have done is wrangle deals with newspaper printers. Whose business, in an emergent post-industrial age, is certainly a bit broken. Huge fucking machines designed only to print newspapers, in a time when newspaper publishers are printing fewer newspapers. RIG set up Newspaper Club, that allows people to print their own short-run newspapers using these big lonely machines that are not running the volume they used to but still need to pay for themselves.

A mature technology. Like broadcasting technology.

Sometimes, though, I look up at these rusting aerials and towers, in a time when TV comes to an increasing number of people through a ground cable or a phone line, and wonder how long it'll be until that business breaks completely — and, more importantly, how long until someone comes for the machines and makes them a deal.

Can you do that with cities?

11. HAUNTED BEEF

I grew out of that young fascination with the paranormal and UFOs (I thought) in my early teens, and instead started buying cheap William Burroughs paperbacks from the local charity shop. Which were, it turned out, mostly about ghosts, UFOs, paranormal phenomena and weird magnetic fields.

Ghost hunters, like the people of this digital-cities conference I am currently giving this talk to, are very technical people. Back home, they roam the abandoned houses and haunted places of Britain with electromagnetic field readers, convinced that ghosts produce an electromagnetic field.

Of course, twenty years before they started doing that, William Burroughs was asserting in science fiction that the human soul is an electromagnetic field. Thereby haunting the future of haunting.

(I have stolen this notion many times in my work as a science fiction writer.)

There are pages and pages of guides on the net to buying and calibrating such devices, ensuring a clean baseline so that ghost fields can be differentiated from geomagnetic activity or the presence of human-generated fields such as those from rusting pylons or other electrical equipment.

The reason the ghost hunters are so careful to calibrate their scanners against geomagnetic fields is that they want to ensure they see the right ghosts.

The science fiction writer Steve Aylett once wrote: “we’re all just haunted beef, really.”

12. AN ETHEREAL PRESENCE

A scientist called Michael Persinger freaked out human temporal lobes with weak magnetic fields, discovering that such induced the feeling of “an ethereal presence in the room.” A haunting.

(An ethereal presence in the room: half of Burial’s record UNTRUE, adopted by the new hauntologists as a keystone, sounds somewhere between EVP and ghosts trapped in the walls. Alvin Lucier’s “I Am Sitting In A Room” is the recording of playing a short piece of spoken-word into a room, replaying the new recording, re-recording that, and repeating the process dozens of times. Some sound frequencies resonate and are re-captured in the recording. Others are buried in the walls. The middle section of the process sounds like EVP. And then it turns into music.) Swedish “double-blind” experiments have suggested that the haunting effect only happens when the subject knows they’re being exposed to the process,

though Persinger insists the Swedish approach didn’t replicate his experimental conditions. It does, however, throw some light on a bunch of people wandering around old houses at night expecting to see ghosts.

13. EARTHLIGHTS

Paul Devereux associates the Persinger tests with geotectonic stress that throw off EM, in an attempt to explain the Earthlights phenomena as well as the reason why some UFO activity seems entirely location-bound. At stresspoints like the San Andreas Fault, so much EM is being thrown off that our magnetically freaked-out brains are seeing things. Being haunted by lights from space.

It was through the writing and public speaking of Paul Devereux that I learned, first, of archaeo-acoustics, and of spirit tracks.

Archaeo-acoustics I've spoken and written of before: the process of flooding an ancient site with pink noise, identifying the resonant points and therefore determining how the site was used acoustically. Natural spaces can have weird acoustic properties: I'm always reminded of the great black cliff at Thingvellir, the ancient Icelandic parliament field, held there in part because,

I was told by a local historian, the rippling rock was a natural vocal amplifier. Devereux spoke of finding an ancient cave site in India where natural stone formations resonated with the seven basic tones of Indian classical music.

Ah, but spirit tracks...

14. STRESS IMAGERY

UFOs leaking out of the earth. UFOs as stress imagery: the stress of living, the stress of the event, turning electromagnetic noise into pictures of something ghostly and alien. The future oozing up through cracks in the ground like a ghost from its grave.

In the book *FOOD OF THE GODS*, ethnobotanist and psychedelic evangelist Terence McKenna describes his own UFO experience, seeing a glowing machine rising out of the Brazilian rain forest. He says of UFOs that, in his conception, they might be (and I'm transcribing from, badly, McKenna's own reading of the relevant section at a talk) "mirages in time, reflections of distant technologies that haunt space... the UFO is a reflection of a future event that promises humanity's eventual mastery of time and space and matter... coaxed nature into throwing out great burning scintilla of pure contradiction."

He was a hippie and he took a shitload of drugs. Died of a brain tumour. His doctor said to him, I've heard that smoking cannabis can shrink brain tumours. McKenna said, if that were true, believe me, I wouldn't be sitting in your office today.

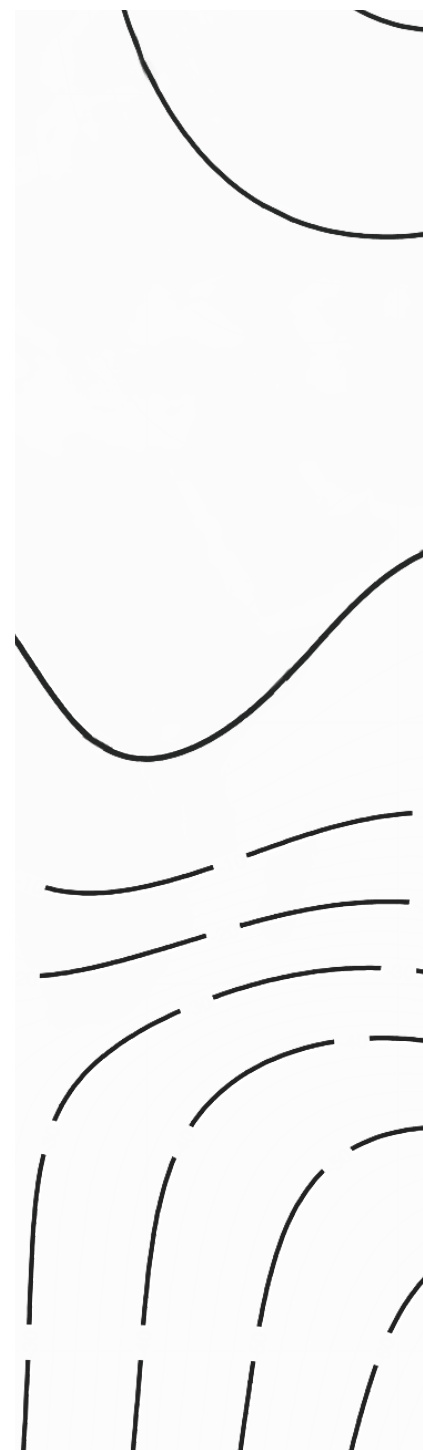
15. BEING BOILED

I've cited McKenna a lot over the years. The last of the great American magical thinkers, at least for a while – no-one's followed him with any success, although many, both genuine apostles and creepy chancers, have tried. The last half of his life was pretty much a public exegesis, trying to quantify and contextualise his drug experiences in the same way that Philip K Dick obsessively wrote his own self-interrogative Exegesis document. He sometimes conflated his UFO experience with his fascination with psilocybin, conflating it with the neurochemical payload of the mushroom. Even his visualisation of the UFO, as a classic George Adamski vehicle, has something of the bemushroomed about it.

Two things to note about McKenna's experience. One, he sat in a very particular place, on the advice of a local contact, and told to watch a very specific portion of the sky. UFO appearances were apparently semi-regular in this area. I don't

know exactly where McKenna was, but neighbouring Chile and Peru sit on the join between the Nazca and South American tectonic plates... and while central Brazilian "mid-plate events" are supposedly fairly rare, they do happen, and they can happen deep in the remote Amazon forest. I like to imagine the young McKenna sitting in the Amazon basin without a clue that he was actually in some vast electromagnetic well, the South American plate beneath his feet flexing and cracking under weird torsion... and then there is strange weather, there are earthlights, and Terence McKenna's magnetically-boiled temporal lobe sees whatever's throwing itself out of the ground as burning hauntology, as a ghost of space, as memories of the future...

(Nazca, of course, bears on its plains huge geoglyphs that Erich von Daniken claimed, in his book *CHARIOTS OF THE GODS*, could be nothing less than airfield markings for alien spacecraft.)



16. ELECTROMAGNETIC CAULDRON

What happens when every city street is an electromagnetic cauldron? What spells will they cast on our poor unprotected headbeef?

(Temporal lobe epilepsy was given as a possible explanation for Whitley Strieber's alien abduction experiences, back in the days when a reasonable percentage of credulous querents considered it from the standpoint that he wasn't just making that shit up.)

(You think you're confused by how random I'm being? Imagine being in the audience at Berlin, getting the condensed thirty-minute version barked at you by a large Englishman who keeps stopping to take drinks of whisky.)

17. WHISKY AGAIN

Whisky again. Jack Schulze again. He sat down with me a couple of years ago while I was very drunk (it was the WIRED UK magazine launch, and the whisky was unwisely free) and showed me some footage on his phone. He'd been in Norway with Timo Arnall (also now of BERG), all folded up (Jack is very tall and weighs about as much as a bottle of free whisky) in a darkened Oslo basement screwing around with RFID tags.

You've all seen RFIDs – Radio Frequency Identification tags, the square pieces of paper used as security devices. The big swirly bit is the antenna, the bit in the middle is the circuit. An interrogator floods a region with radio. When the tag hits the field, it soaks up the energy and uses it to squeeze out its own signal. And that's how you get caught stealing a dirty book.

On the phone, he's showing me something I haven't seen before. A visualisation of the readable volume of the EM field the RFID tag produces when it's hit by an

interrogator. It seems bloody huge. Much bigger and more energetic than you'd imagine. On the iPhone, I'm watching ghost mushrooms rise out of physical objects.

Suddenly I had a new understanding of that small wave of body-modification enthusiasts who implanted themselves with magnets, so that they could actually feel when they were passing through electromagnetic fields (like security gates).

19. THE CITY IS THERE TO HAUNT US

Take one street. A digital spirit track. Antenna ghosts whispering at us. All of us experiencing an ethereal presence in the street. Because our brains are being magnetically boiled by a constant blooming of experience inducing fields from everywhere.

I am in Berlin, standing in front of a few hundred people involved in the theory and planning of the digital cities of the future, and saying to them: Is this what you want to do to us? You fucking monsters.

(I got a laugh.)

The city is there to haunt us.

Perhaps we might hold up our phones, and see the spirits on the screen, through the camera, via an AR (Augmented Reality) application. Seeing the spirit track on our ghost box.

20. CORPSE FLIGHTPATH

Spirit tracks. Spirit roads. Ghost roads. Corpse roads. Lych ways. The Leichenflughbahn, which means, gorgeously, "corpse flightpath."

Ghost roads appear, quite simply, to be the paths through which dead bodies were carried to cemeteries. But, even as digital cities will be built atop the base matter of the contemporary city, ghost roads were superimposed over old geographies. Corpse roads took the paths that ghosts and other numinous beings were already known to pass down. Spirit tracks, in German folklore, were imbued with "the magical characteristics of the dead."

Spirit tracks. The roads of ghosts. Magical characteristics.

These haunted streets could be interrogated, too. Devereux writes of a crossroads in Iceland where the interested hauntologist could "summon the spirits of the dead from the church cemeteries and they

21. CONVERSATIONS WITH THINGS

would glide up the roads to the crossroads where the seer could divine information from them.”

He also notes my favourite, “stile divination”. In Cornwall, apparently, ghosts liked perching on country stiles in the path of spirit roads, and one could sit there and interrogate them as they go. A stile is an RFID reader for dead people.

You know what a ghost box is? They pre-date EVP. It’s said that Thomas Edison tried to make one once. There’s a whole community of ghost box makers on the net today, right alongside the ghost detector people and the Instrumental Trans-Communication people (add ITC to EIF and RFID). A ghost box is an electromagnetic device for communicating with ghosts through radio waves. Some ghost boxes claim two-way communication, in fact. Conversations with things that are not alive as we commonly understand the word “alive” to mean.

I imagine most of the people here at this conference in Berlin have one of those in their pockets.

And by “conversations with things that are not alive” and all that, I don’t mean phone calls with family members and dumped boyfriends.

That’s a bit of a mundane digit-

al-city future, though, I suppose – having to communicate with the ghosts through a glowing box. And also a bit expensive for many city dwellers, I would think. Although possibly I’m just cheap.

22. PSYCHOSONIC

The ghost box is also a symbol of hauntology. Ghost Box is the name of one of the pre-eminent music labels associated with sonic hauntology: a music that traffics in the ghostly, in the peculiarly unsettling early electronic music of the Sixties and Seventies, in the strange common culture of 70s British television, in the ejecta of the collision of the rural and folkloric and the electronic and modern.

One touchstone is the children’s tv series THE CHANGES, where a return to primitive non-technological life (or perhaps Terence McKenna’s much-discussed notion of an Archaic Revival) is triggered by the emitting of psychosonics from those great rusting pylons. The sound makes people want to smash technology, and, after everything has been smashed, the pylons are so repulsive to people that they’re driven (down old tracks?) into the countryside.

(I like to think of Jack Schulze cowering under one, yelling “No! Fuckers!”)

The music for this series was created by Paddy Kingsland, of the BBC Radiophonic Workshop. He joined the Workshop in 1970. Delia Derbyshire was still there, not having yet flown off to become, among other things, a radio operator. Not quite having closed her first career in music, but getting there. She’d been a catalysing point for electronic sound in the Sixties. She’d talked to Pink Floyd, the Beatles, the Stones, and apparently had an orgy with Yoko Ono and other persons unknown on her own living room floor.

“I was always very generous in telling people everything I knew,” she said.

And when everyone knew everything she knew, it seems that it was decided that there was no great use left for her. And

so she left, to become a ghost of electronic sound for some twenty years.

23. WHOSE STREETS

As I was working on the first draft of this, students were tearing through central London en masse and yelling “Whose streets? Our streets!”

Journalist Laurie Penny was out in the middle of them with a phone, reporting in through Twitter. I was keeping an eye on Twitter as I wrote this, actually, so I could shout at Laurie (who has the self-preservation instinct of a lemming dipped in vodka) occasionally. (She recently cited me in an interview as a provider of “avuncular advice.” She did not add that she never fucking listens to it.)

And it occurred to me that they’re not our streets. In the sense that we can’t build in them.

24. REPORT ON THE SITUATION OF CONSTRUCTIONS

It’s why some of the digital cities rhetoric is turning more and more to evangelism, partnering with civic authorities, trying to influence the actual owners of bricks and mortar and street furniture. Explaining it. Giving the gift of the digital city to our ruling classes. Which is many places isn’t getting further than, say, publicly posted building permits in New York City having QR codes printed on them. Which will be great until someone steals the permit to make a crack pipe out of it.

Those RFIDs won’t be ours. They’ll be corporate agents of one kind or another. There’s an artist who’s recently made small ripples by cementing USB sticks into the exteriors of buildings, but any intervention will remain on that fairly tiny scale.

Any physical intervention.

25. FLYPOSTING IS ILLEGAL

Flyposting is illegal. Google Maps pins and AR anchors are not.

Cognitive cities require the approval and collaboration of city authorities. The same people who make flyposting illegal.

Spirit roads were overlaid on folkloric paths believed to be travelled by ghosts. It seems oddly apt to me, here in our hauntological future condition, that we might superimpose ghost traffic on our real roads.

Opening the streets to spectral detournements, applying digital sandpaper to the real world, and the fictions of ARGs, Alternate Reality Games. Pirate broadcasting from the husks of old buildings again, like those Essex nutters sending pictures to televisions at four in the morning.

Mediated by ghost boxes, enabling near field instrumental trans-communication with the world of the invisible. Electric scrying pools, a glowing screen

for conversation with the voices of the other side.

26. BEST CASE SCENARIO

Ever been to Iceland? The Icelandic government spend a hideous amount of money on fireworks every year. But the road out of Keflavik is still a dirt track. These are the people who're going to fund your new digital infrastructure? They can't build fucking roads. Our authorities are sometimes at their most benign when they're at their most incompetent.

As I was writing this, Laurie was sending through reports and photos of kids being beaten by police on the streets of London via her ghost box. Because Western societies don't, yet, switch off the internet and the mobile phone network when they want to beat the shit out of their populace. And I often think that it's not that they don't want to, so much as they are old and slow and haven't quite figured out the way the world works yet. Ten years ago in Britain, there was a great outcry when speed cameras became ubiquitous on our roads. Lots of talk of 1984, Big Broth-

er. But the anger kind of died away when it was later found that, not only were the cameras not digital, but that most of them didn't have any film in. The county of Norfolk had no film in any of its speed cameras for the whole of 2001.

And that might be the best case scenario.

27. THE LOCKS

Governments and corporations colluded to shut off mainline internet and phone service in Egypt, but a couple of hundred people running TOR bridges kept the information moving. Now, maybe you've all been having conversations about tying countless services into a digital-city infrastructure and then giving them keys to someone else and how that would work when that's centralised and some complete strangers now operate the locks.

If you really want to talk to digital ghosts on the streets of your cities, you may end up holding ad hoc digital seances. With your ghost boxes boiling your brains.

A bit of, in fact, radiation communism.

28. THE MAIDEN

Listen to what the ghosts are telling you.

A man called James Douglas gave the Maiden, an early form of guillotine, to the court of Mary Queen Of Scots in the 1500s. Legend has it that he was also the first person to be executed with it.

As a rule, Western societies tend to need people like you to give the concepts behind digital cities to them.

29. OUR STREETS

There's no such thing as ghosts. UFOs are just lights in the sky. And vodka is probably not improved by strontium. None of that matters as much as the decision you have to make before you start to make the future, before you get carried away by the lights in the sky and the things you can do with your glowing boxes. Whose streets are these, that you're going to be building your cognitive cities on?

Whose streets? Our streets.

Ultimately, this conference I'm standing at in Berlin, these people I'm talking to, might turn out to be a conference of people who are hunting a ghost.

It's your job to make that real.

It's my job to remind you that I'm haunting you.

