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Ghost writing: photographing (the) spectral north

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This paper explores photography’s spectral nature in relation to the concept of difference, as theorised by Jacques Derrida. What emerges is a way of thinking about photography as a kind of ghost writing. Derrida’s assertion of the importance of photography’s idiomatic logic is actively applied here to perceptions and representations of north. We are alerted to the instability of north by the various definitions currently in use by the Ordnance Survey in Great Britain. This allows us to think about north in terms of the disruption of self-identity found at the core of Derrida’s thinking about photography and to understand differential north via photography’s spectral logic, which ‘traces a relation of haunting’ between the opposition north/south. In addition, Magnetic North is unlocatable in any permanent sense given that it is constantly moving and problematised by our mistaken conventions of naming. The spectral north emerges as a productive term which resonates with specific landscapes on the periphery of Britain. In these landscapes, which contain the remains of wartime defences, the irruption of the past is keenly felt, producing unsettling experiences for the visitor. I present photographic fieldwork from these wartime coastal batteries and consider both the images and place in terms of Tim Edensor’s ‘mundane spaces’ where the trace of the spectre is free to roam. These inscribed landscapes, archives in a sense, are complex imbrications of different timeframes and historic resonances. They provide a particularly fertile location for a medium such as photography, given its peculiar relationship with time.

Our bearings are hinged around the cardinal points, those polarities of direction which leave us in danger of falling into binarisms of thought. Where I sit writing, 57°39′36″N, 3°19′32″W is a place, but this way of thinking about place is built upon the certainty of the map, the paper signifier of the surface of the world which insists that we know precisely where we are. North, however, is an unstable concept. It is contingent, mobile and elusive. As Peter Davidson (2005, 8) points out, north is always moving away from us, always just beyond our grasp, a concept epitomised by difference. My concern then is to find a way of thinking about north which captures that sense of internal difference.

Certain theorisations of photography offer fertile ways of thinking about this, in particular the writings of Jacques Derrida. What is especially interesting for me as a photographic practitioner is Derrida’s idea that photography works as a metalanguage for bigger aesthetic, philosophical and political questions (Richter 2010, xix). His writings on photography draw attention to the medium’s ‘own alterity … the ways in which photography exposes … non-self-identity and internal self-differentiation’ (Richter 2010, xxi). That is to say, Derrida’s theorisation demonstrates that the medium’s technological status lends it a particular structural character which disrupts the internal self-identity of the photograph. The correspondence between subject and its image is deferred by the invisible lacuna of the delay.

The idea that the subject and its photographic image are non-identical, that the photographic instant is in itself eternally deferred, is of significance here. These ideas present a challenge to any concept, be it of photography, of the north or of landscape, as uniquely self-identical and stable. According to Derrida’s account, the medium of photography itself becomes a lens through which we are able to see and re-interpret essentialist conceptions of northern peripheral spaces. Important then is Derrida’s assertion that, in essence, photography is spectral. This, coupled with the observation that photography can be articulated as différence, leads to a discussion of the medium in terms of ghost writing. Although the initial encounter with the spectral is via a discussion of photography, I go on in this essay to consider the spectral in a little more detail with specific reference to the differential concept of north. I close with an account of photographic fieldwork in two of the peripheral northlands of Scotland, landscapes which capture a sense of the spectral for reasons which will become apparent.

One way to pursue our investigations here is by paying attention to the hauntology of photography. Sounded in French, hauntology is almost indistinguishable from ontology – a typically Derridean joke which draws our attention to inaudible differences in language, through which he aims to question the concept of being as uniquely present to itself:

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Hauntology supplants its near-homonym ontology, replacing the priority of being and presence with the figure of the ghost as that which is neither present nor absent, neither dead nor alive. (Davis 2005, 373)

The certainty of being as pure presence is destabilised by the figure of the ghost, which is emblematic of the Derridean undecidable neither/nor. The relevance of this is that regardless of category, whether photography or north, the question ‘what is?’ becomes haunted by ‘what it is not’. For photography this haunting takes place at the point of delay: the moment at which the subject is othered from itself. North, as we shall see, is haunted by south and carries its trace within it.

Crucial here is that photographic delay. Between the impression and development, photography’s space-time is split. The opening and closing of the shutter splits the present and dislocates time. Michael Naas notes that regardless of category, whether photography or north, the question ‘what is?’ becomes haunted by ‘what it is not’. For photography this haunting takes place at the point of delay: the moment at which the subject is othered from itself. (Naas 2011, 217). This delay means that in Derridean terms photography is a return. The notion that photography as writing is articulated as sameness in difference emerges from a way of thinking about the medium which takes cognisance of the repetitions, elisions and gaps produced by the photographic process itself. This is demonstrable in my own recent photographs made in the landscape around Inverness-shire (Figure 1). The use of the grid format underscores the impossibility of the unified photographic moment and shows a view of place distributed across and between each frame. The subject is disseminated spatially and temporally across the image through repetition, misalignment and changes in focus.

The opening and closing of the shutter splits the present and dislocates time. Michael Naas’ question regarding when the photograph ‘takes place’, and the attendant dislocation of time, means that the photograph articulates its subject as other than itself. The photograph is not simply a picture of what was, but what was not and what is no longer. The strange ‘being’ of the photographic sign, considered in Derridean terms (Spivak 1997, xvii), and indeed bodies of photography are inscribed by the lacuna of the delay which leaves a trace of the subject as other than itself. The capture of time gives photographs a peculiar relationship with the living present (Barthes 2000; Derrida 2010a). We can think of this in terms of the photograph as an archive of the (then) present which becomes ‘a non-reproducible referent, an irreplaceable place’ (Derrida 2010a, 3). The living present, although archived photographically, is never reproducible, nor is it possible to retrace our steps to find the place which has been photographed.

If we consider this in terms of photographic images of the landscape, we can see that the place where the photograph occurred is irretrievable, it can only be imagined. In these terms the photograph is aporetic insofar as it enables the past to come back over and over like ‘a ghost whose expected return repeats itself, again and again’ (Derrida 2006, 10). Such is the spectral nature of photography, it is ghost writing, a medium which writes the present into an archive enabling it to repeat and repeat again, whilst consigning the originary moment to the realm of the irretrievable. For Derrida, therefore, photography exemplifies alterity, non-coincidence between image and its subject, writing its referent as a ghost of its former self:

I like the word ‘medium’ here. It speaks to me of specters, of ghosts and phantoms, like these images themselves. From the first ‘apparition’, it’s all about the return of the departed. It is there in black and white, it can be verified after the fact. The spectral is the essence of photography. (Derrida 1998, vi)

The trace of the other haunts the photograph, and, as we shall see, the landscape. The trace, spectral and mobile, effaces itself within the seemingly concrete presence announced by the photographic image, it ‘disappear[s] in its own appearing’ (Derrida 1973, 165).

What Derrida describes as the ‘troubling desire’ for the other (2010b, 175) which we experience in front of the photograph can even be effected by a photograph of ourselves. That is, we are troubled by our own others: ‘[T]he other can even be “me”, me having been or having had to be, me already dead in the future anterior and past anterior of my photograph’ (Derrida 1988, 264). It is through this granular surface that the referent is promised, yet eternally deferred. The photochemical interactions of light and the film’s surface record the subject in a latent spectrality which only allows the shadow to be revealed through later chemical action. This image in waiting is uniquely photographic; it is an image which is already there but it is yet to come: a phantom. Indeed, by virtue of the loss of the referent in the very process of photographic inscription, it would seem that photography makes ghosts of us all.

As suggested, following Derrida’s claim that photography provides a lens through which to look at other questions we might consider concepts of north in terms of photography’s inherent alterity. As already noted, Derrida describes the spectral as the ‘essence’ of photography. Given his obvious resistance
to rigid conceptualisations, we can only assume that this is a deliberate ploy to question essence itself. That is to say, all essences are haunted by the trace of otherness.

Derrida asserts that photography has its own idiomatic logic which captures or ‘photographs all conceptual oppositions’ (1988, 267). Therefore, we can use the idiom of photography here as a metalanguage to investigate the binary opposition north/south, which is problematised (productively) by the inherent differences at the heart of the idea of north. Peter Davidson (2005, 8–11) argues that we all carry our own idea(s) of north within us. As he points out, using as his emblem Dalziel + Scullion’s artwork of the same name, there are many norths, all of which embody a range of personal and cultural ideas and imaginaries. Here I expand upon the notion that north is a differential concept insofar as there are, according to the Ordnance Survey:

[T]hree norths commonly in use in Great Britain. Grid North: the direction of a grid line which is parallel to the central meridian on the National Grid. True North: the direction of longitude which converges on a meridian of the North Pole. Magnetic North: the direction indicated by a magnetic compass. Magnetic North moves slowly with a variable rate and is currently west of Grid North in Great Britain. (Ordnance Survey n.d.)

In addition, in order to find Grid North through recourse to a compass, a declination value is required which is both local and time-bound (dependent upon the exact location and a specific timeframe) which suggests that there is an interstitial space between the different norths. It is however, within the field of Magnetic North that the spectral idiom of photography is of use. It is here that the spectre expresses its force.

As the gyration of the compass settles, the magnetite needle points north. The earth’s magnet is essentially bi-polar, a binary north/south. That the magnetite needle points north is open to question insofar as, if the north pointing needle is attracted to itself then it points north. As magnetism teaches us, however, opposites attract; therefore the north pointing needle seeks south. What, in common language, we refer to as north is in fact south, that is the north pole of the compass needle points to what is physically a magnetic south pole. Because the magnetite needle marked north points south, our idea of north, through a mistaken convention of naming, carries the trace of south within it. This is relevant insofar as north as south-seeking confuses our geographical categories and problematises all notions of the purity of north. If Magnetic North is an unstable concept, either in terms of its mobility or its hybridity, its self-identity is open to question. Where is north? is reframed as Where does north point? If the logic of north/south, to use Derrida’s words about photography, ‘traces a relation of haunting’ (1988, 267), then north is haunted by south. In these terms it is heterogeneous and undecidable, carrying the spectral trace of south within it. If however, north is haunted by its spectral other, then the same applies to south. Each category is problematised by its own alterity.

Davidson (2005) argues that the far north has acted as a kind of blueprint for conceptualisations of Antarctica in the far south. Our evocations of north have in fact informed the way in which we think about south:

All of the ways of thinking about Antarctica are taken from ideas of the far north, raising the question that there may be places – mountain ranges as well as the South Pole – that are thought of as honorary norths. (Davidson 2005, 19)

South as an honorary north is, at first glance, a benign concept, but on closer inspection it carries a certain colonialism of thought, that is, the idea of south made in the image of north. This is south surveyed from the north rather than a productive view of both north and south which considers each binary opposition as the difference of the other:

We could thus take up all the coupled oppositions on which philosophy is constructed, and from which our language lives, not in order to see opposition vanish but to see the emergence of a necessity such that one of the terms appears as the difference of the other. (Derrida 1973, 148)

North, constantly shifting, a place which is always moving away from us (Davidson 2005, 8) is south in différence. Yet this is further complicated by the fact that the north pole of the compass is south-seeking which renders north a ghostly term. It is neither here nor there, a motif of undecidability haunted by its other. North is somewhere yet nowhere: unlocatable.

It is the very instability of ideas about north which leads me to search for spectral qualities in the landscapes where I work. As a practitioner I consider the term landscape to be generative because its older etymology is suggestive of places which are shaped by people; produced through collective endeavour (Jackson c1984, 7). Inherent in the term are ideas of human shaping and flux, inscribed in the very fabric of the land itself. It is this worked over quality of landscape which enables it to
be considered as an ‘archive’. This extends beyond the physical, human inscription of place and is epitomised by the sense of temporality in the landscape, arising from the carryover of one timeframe into the next. The landscape as archive is a physical demonstration that the present is always already interrupted by the past. If, however, we take into account Derrida’s ideas relating to time, then this archive is also suggestive of the future. As Ross Benjamin and Heesok Chang write:

Insofar as every instant of time bears traces of a lingering past and hovers in suspense of an unforeseeable future, the cohesiveness of the present unravels. Time, Derrida argues, is never free of vestiges of the past and stirrings of the future, but rather constantly filtered through the structures of memory and anticipation. The present is consequently never homogenous, undivided and identical to itself, but always already spectral, intersected by other temporal modes that cannot be subsumed by it. (2006, 151–152)

That sense of landscape as disrupted by the past which undermines the cohesiveness of the present is sharpened in particular places such as those marked by the remnants of wartime, sites very often located on the peripheries, at edges and coastlines (Figure 2). The relevance of Derrida’s writing is that the present is inflected by the past but more critically, this opens the possibility of an ‘unforeseeable future’ (Benjamin and Chang 2006, 151). It is the paradox at play here which is productive insofar as the trope of the spectre able to return and return again, signifies that the past is never completely finished with. The revenant, literally dislocates time, visiting its own future (our present) demanding that we in turn anticipate our possible futures. This notion that within our own experience of the present there is already an anticipation of the
future is in fact one of the drivers of photographic practice.

Just being in these peripheral landscapes, so redolent of the past, seems strange. Walking amongst checkpoints and pillboxes provides an unsettling experience as they are so obviously structures from a different time (Figure 3). The present feels disrupted in these places, subjected to the incursion of the past. The sites are now experienced as criss-crossed by imaginary lines of sight, producing for us the strong sense of being observed by an unknown other. Derrida’s words come to mind: ‘This spectral someone other looks at us, we feel ourselves being looked at by it, outside of any synchrony’ (2006, 6). In these peripheral landscapes it is the feeling of the unknown other which renders our experience of the landscape spectral. It is not that they are literally haunted, but that the experience of them becomes complicated by other temporalities. These places draw attention to the spectral because they disrupt the self-identity of the present and interrupt the linear logic of the passage of time. By feeling the other from outside of our own synchrony we experience the present as non-contemporaneous with itself (Derrida 2006, xviii); time is out of joint.

I have written elsewhere about landscape in terms of text (Wall 2010), as generative spaces which invite a writerly engagement. As Roland Barthes states ‘text is not the product of a labour … but the very theatre of production’ (1981, 36). This way of thinking about landscape underlines its temporal qualities, it recognises the fact that landscape is ever-changing. It is inflected by the past and anticipates that which is yet to come. Although writing specifically about the urban landscape, Tim Edensor argues that, ‘places can be considered as being usually enfolded into various networks stretched out through different time spaces’ (2005, 63). Therefore
we can argue that the landscape is a trace structure which is haunted by both past and future, ‘producing a series of disjunctions through which the past erupts into the present’ (Edensor 2008, 324–325). As noted earlier, this conception of the landscape as an archive of traces – a complex imbrication of timeframes and historic resonances – is a particularly apposite description of many of the wartime defences whose remnants litter Britain’s coastline. These sites, often peculiarly juxtaposed with leisure spaces: beaches and forest trails elicit unsettling responses. Their decaying structures are part of the enfolding of place which implicates both the past and the future in the present a ‘non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present’ (Derrida 2006, xviii). The overlaying or intersection of time in these places forms complex networks, in the interstices of which the past lingers and the future hovers. It is in these strange between places, which are more obviously susceptible to the incursions of other time frames, that we are reminded of the very spectrality of the present.

The imbrication of the living present with the ghostly vestiges of the past is considered by Tim Edensor in terms of the mundane spaces of his commute to work which articulate the spectral traces of the working class (2008, 324). He deliberately chooses the everyday, forgotten spaces of the urban environment in order to emphasis the unspectacular qualities of the spectral urban landscape (2008, 324). For Edensor, haunting has an affirmative aspect. What is especially relevant here is his distinction between ‘official sites of memory’ and ‘mundane spaces’ (2008, 330). Mundane spaces are more likely to be haunted by the spectral other, by virtue of the fact that official sites of memory are regulated by fixed, yet altogether partial notions of history.
In official sites of memory . . . authoritative accounts inscribe selective versions about the way things were . . . However, in mundane spaces . . . ghosts are more freely able to haunt, for the regulatory processes that hold sway are less concerned with where and how things, activities and people should be placed . . . And so patches of underdetermined land, architectural vestiges, stray objects and outmoded signs endure. (Edensor 2008, 330)

Edensor’s description of the difference between the official site of memory and the mundane resonates with personal experiences in the Orcadian landscape. Whilst on a recent field trip I visited the Neolithic settlement, Skara Brae for the first time. The visit to the site was preceded by the customary tour of the interpretation material, looped audio visuals, a display of artefacts and factual information, all of which ensure that the visitor is appropriately situated, both physically and intellectually in advance. The waymarkers recording significant historical events are set into the ground at the side of the path and designed to direct the visitor in a reverse chronology towards the settlement. Experience is very carefully managed and so my early sense of excitement soon gave way to disappointment. This prompted me to question whether there had been too much prior exposure to the site through photographs (there was one in my hotel bedroom), whether the restricted access to the living quarters was an irritation (though clearly understandable) and whether the timescales involved, in spite of the waymarkers, were for me, simply unimaginable.

The following day I visited the wartime defences of Hoxa Head (Figures 4–5). The entire site filled me with the strangest sense of dread, causing me to wonder
whether the site had stronger resonances because of its closer proximity in historical time. Was there a kind of spectral spillage from near history? Or did that sense of dread arise from the fact that these were wartime defences? Reflecting on Edensor I realise that the answer lies not in the disparity between the historical timeframes but in the way my experience of each site was mediated.

At Skara Brae I performed the role of an interested tourist, drank coffee, ate lunch, took some photographs and left (the time of my visit to Skara Brae was planned around lunch). By contrast, the visit to Hoxa Head was deeply unsettling (Lossie Forest provoked a similar experience). As Edensor (2008, 314) writes ‘such intrusions reveal the powerful affective, sensual and imaginative effects of such vestiges, which, like the figure of the ghost are amorphous and slippery’. In places such as Hoxa Head the architectural remains are unregulated and as if to underscore their status as ‘stray objects’ (Edensor, 2008, 330) the visitor finds some of them filled with cow dung now they have become part of the island’s farming landscape and used as animal shelters. Elsewhere on Orkney I had seen the remains of buildings on a wartime airfield used to store farm machinery. In addition, my experience of Hoxa Head was rather strangely haunted by the previous day’s visit to Skara Brae: the warren of trenches and concrete structures dug in to the top of the cliffs were redolent of Skara Brae which is dug into a midden for protection. Even the hand build components such as small retaining walls and the inside of the circular First World War gun emplacement reminded me of the neatly stacked, flat sandstone slabs of the Neolithic settlement. Where Skara Brae was a closed experience, the visit to Hoxa Head was permeated by other times and indeed other places. It was a place which acknowledged that ‘the past is always-already in the midst of the present’ (Edensor 2008, 331) – transected by different times.

Due to their status as wartime defences the buildings of Hoxa Head are not properly described as mundane in Edensor’s terms; however, their presence in a rural environment subject to changing use and recontextualisation means these places are never fully demolished or covered over. Therefore, what Edensor claims for the mundane places of Manchester’s suburbs can also be asserted about the wartime batteries in Orkney and Moray: ‘the past is less likely to be entirely disposed of, polished away or obliterated. Things, buildings, people and traces hang on’ (Edensor 2008, 326).

Although the phantom other, or for Edensor the ‘ghosts of the working class’ (2008, 329), always elude us, the phantom has an ethical dimension. Just as the ethical turn in deconstruction is marked by the emergence of a concern for the spectre, Edensor argues that reckoning with ghosts is imperative to the understanding of place:

[T]hese spectres are as likely to haunt mundane, everyday spaces as ancient mansions and battlegrounds. Confronting ghosts is a necessary check on grand visions and classifications that fix understandings of place, for they can provide an empathetic, sensual, impressionistic insight into the unseen energies that have created the city. (Edensor 2008, 331)

Coming to terms with ghosts is necessary for us to remind ourselves that place is not easily classified. It is mobile, sensuous and open to the future return of the other.

We might also argue that it is the technological nature of a site like a wartime battery which renders these places spectral. This has resonance with photography for, as Derrida argues, ‘[e]very culture has its phantoms’ and this spectrality ‘is conditioned by its technology’ (Derrida, 2010a, 39).

Photography is a technological invention which enables the production of an enduring likeness of that which no longer exists and to which the referent, now lost, cannot be reduced. The essence of Derridean photographic spectrality is held in the notion that the photograph enables the return of the other; that which is no more. This is not confined to the dead but, as we have seen already, includes the possible return of our own others. The camera renders time out of joint, its images are doubles yet they are haunted by their own other, the other who was photographed: the lost referent. The photograph is the simulacrum of the referent indelibly erased by the spacing of photography, the ghostly writing of its shadow.

The conception that photography has its own logic of relevance to all oppositional structures (Derrida 1988, 267) has been explored here with specific reference to the binary opposition north/south. As we have seen, it is the very invisible differences between norths and the relation of haunting between north and south that make it a productive term through which to consider specific northern landscapes. It is only by trying to find north physically, geographically and conceptually that these differences come into play. The moving field of Magnetic North destabilises our ideas about the fixity of place and alert us to ‘the unseen energies’ (Edensor 2008, 331) at play.

Understanding photography as a kind of ghost writing takes into account the medium’s strange relation with
time. Its essential spectrality, figured as a disruption of self-identity and self-presence, has an interesting parallel in the explorations of the temporality of the landscape. The idea that place is an enfolding of different timeframes (Edensor 2005, 63) between which the past lingers and the future hovers is made plain by landscapes which are haunted by the wartime remains of coastal Britain. These decaying structures lie on the land’s surface, stray objects which have been re-appropriated in a variety of cultural ways from farm storage to social gatherings and shelter.

The experience of these wartime sites is rarely managed and this means that our readings of them are subject to the incursion of other experiences: other places, other times and other narratives. These landscapes facilitate imaginative encounters which contribute to the uncertainty and unsettling experience they provoke. The percolation of one place into another inflected my own experiences at both Hoxa Head and Lossie Forest. The visit to Skara Brae insinuated its way into the images made during other field trips by way of an emerging concern for the half-buried. This resulted in the image Lossie Forest III (Figure 6) which evokes the sense that, in this location in particular, the pillboxes and concrete defences are being overtaken by stray trees which have self-seeded from the Forestry Commission planting.

Ultimately, however, fieldwork and reading has led me to think quite differently about photographic practice itself. Whilst the notion of photography as writing was already a productive one, the expansion of this to include Derrida’s ideas about photography’s spectrality has been especially germane. Accounting for photography as a kind of ghost writing requires us to consider the possible futures of our images, to regard photography as an anticipatory practice. This enables us to think about photography as a practice in
search of a future which hovers in the landscape around us, only to inscribe it as an image of the past which comes back and comes back again to freely haunt the present. The spectral north, a place that is and is not, draws our attention to the idea that the landscape is irrupted by the past, reminding us of the spectrality of the present. In these landscapes we are simultaneously at the centre and on the periphery, in a between place haunted by others.

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