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The Hauntology of Media Addiction

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This article proposes an exploration of the phenomenon of media addiction as the expression of a haunting: the re-emergence of nostalgia for presence and materiality. Relying on Jacques Derrida's hauntology and Karen Barad's neomaterialist theory, media addiction is refigured as an unavoidable human-technology bond that politics of life cannot escape.

They are always there, spectres, even if they do not exist, even if they are no longer, even if they are not yet. (Derrida 221)

Introduction

Having a reliable and lightning fast Internet connection is well near a bare necessity, if one belongs to a specific subset of the social matrix. For a white, middle class Western European person, for example, being digitally connected and available is part of their performance as a functional, productive member of society. But like any other sociocultural practice,[1] participating in online interaction must adhere to certain rules if it is to be considered normal. With networked devices such as computers or smart phones, the theme *du jour* seems to be the dangers of a lack of moderation. How one engages with media is a matter of delicate negotiation: refusing to embrace new technologies makes one a luddite; too much enthusiasm could prompt accusations of wanton technophilia. Considering the alarming number of news articles on Internet addiction, it seems like it is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain just the right kind of commitment to technology, especially technologies of communication. An overinvestment in particular media (and therefore technologies) of communication is a problem that academics and various cultural critics deem necessary to address. And sometimes, loving media too much becomes more than a personal problem, and turns into an anxiety that manages to haunt whole societies.

'Haunting' is not just a stylistic choice in this situation – it might also be an adept way of approaching the subject of the human's interaction with technologies of communication in the contemporary context of highly technologised post-industrial capitalism. Hauntings are a way of discussing the not-quite-present but not-quite-absent; a lack inherent in the construction of all and every concept, an uncertainty that makes the present "out of joint" (Derrida 202). Jacques Derrida coined the term 'hauntology' as a play on words that was meant a critique, or perhaps a refiguration of ontology (the being of Being), and employed it to talk about the legacy of Karl Marx. Musicologists used it in order to talk about the re-emergence of 'forgotten' musical sounds and techniques in modern compositions (Fisher 16). But if hauntology evokes a resurgence of the past that destabilises the present, the study of media could very well benefit from hauntology and the Derridean project of talking about ghosts as a symptom of a 'time out of joint'. Presence, absence, and the potential to

become out of joint are ingrained in the very meaning of media, and especially in media of communication.

This article proposes an exploration of the phenomenon of media addiction as the expression of a haunting: the sporadic re-emergence of nostalgia for presence, materiality, and the body. After a brief description of the contemporary phenomenon of media addiction, I will in turn bring forward some of the earliest key conflicts involving materiality and immateriality surrounding networked media. These incursions into the history of problematic human-media relationships set the scene for their current incarnations - media addictions - where the incongruity between materiality and immateriality, presence and unpresence, are embodied by figures such as the Internet addict. The clash of materiality and immateriality within media feeds into ideas of spectrality and danger, which are unavoidably problematised as threats to the health and wellbeing of populations in postindustrial contexts. The last section of this paper explores the place of media addiction as an unavoidable human-technology bond that politics of life cannot escape.

The problem with new media

The century-old ceramic tiles that adorn the stations of Budapest's underground, the second oldest in the world, are covered in national public awareness campaign posters. Several of them depict a teenage boy, his torso encrusted with electronic circuits, eyes downcast, large headphones covering his ears. 'I am part of the network', the boy proclaims. But the bolded letters of the campaign tag line warn: 'Tell your child that there is life outside the web'. Hungary's youth prefers the company of machines rather than their peers, the poster seems to say, and they need to be brought back to the fold. Similar thoughts radiate from academia as well: the sociologist of science Sherry Turkle, who has written extensively on the psychology of human-technology relationships, also laments the loss of social connectivity and affective relations caused by the Internet in her latest book *Alone Together* (2011). An inside perspective is provided by former self-described Internet and gaming addicts, who write cautionary tales about the dangers of falling into the trap of excessive technology use: titles such as *Unplugged: My Journey into the Dark World of Video Game Addiction* or *Cyber Junkie: Escape the Gaming and Internet Trap*. The picture is now complete: new media are a problem, and a dangerous one at that.

These opinions form only the visible tip of an iceberg composed of countless scientific studies on the (disputed) existence of technology addictions, and frequent news items describing the ways in which technologies of communication restructure social relationships, bodies, and minds, often for the worse. As much as these concerns seem to be rooted in the emergence of 'new media', anxiety over various once-new technologies of communication is not a newfangled occurrence. Similar reactions have accompanied the invention of the telegraph, telephone or radio–delight, curiosity and creative engagement with new cultural forms, doubled by apprehension and mistrust over their potential to engender the death of traditional ones (Fitzpatrick 6). The new media of the past might have posed a problem because they threatened to unsettle the ordinary rhythm of life, forcing power structures to adapt. Contemporary discourse seems to echo these arguments, but instead of directly addressing its

unease with the changes produced within the social fabric, it is instead organised around the recovery of the individual subject who falls into the media trap.

Contemporary media addiction emerges as an expression of an anxiety over the new media situated at the nexus of the individual and the social. The term itself, addiction, has been affixed to problematic uses of the media ever since the popularisation of the Internet in the nineties. The first media addiction treatment institution was founded in 1996 as part of McLean Hospital in Massachusetts by a Harvard professor, Maressa Orzack (Marriott). However, media addiction does not does not necessarily have to follow the model of addiction as described by medical literature. It does not display the same physiological symptoms as drug addiction (Rabadanova and Abacharova 253). In the case of media addiction, the meaning of 'addiction' is closer to its sixteenth century etymological sense: a proclivity, devotion towards a certain thing or practice. But devotion, love, and encounters with the object of desire are always an act of desubjectification (Deleuze and Guattari 35), a threat to the individuality of the subject, making her a candidate for becoming the Other or a monster.

Ghosts in the machine

Ghosts, zombies, vampires, cyborgs and monsters are some of the most common tropes of postmodern theory. Feminist theorist Donna Haraway took the first step by making the cyborg into the figuration of a technofeminist future, and other inhumanoid metaphors were soon to follow: the zombie, the vampire, the virus. The ghostliness of media and of technology has been explored quite extensively, with many media theories not shying away from blending the technical and the supernatural. Friedrich Kittler, one of the most celebrated representatives of materialist-media theory, wrote: "media always already yield ghost phenomena" (22). Like ghosts, media connects spaces and times which do not succeed one another in a traditional fashion. Media allow us to see, hear or read things that are not 'really' there. Media complicates the nature of being, and even the most pragmatic theorists of media will pause to ponder the matter of ghosts.

Media theorists Jeffrey Sconce and John Durham Peters have studied extensively the longstanding historical associations between spectrality and media. According to Sconce, the invention of the telegraph is intimately linked to fantasies of disembodiment and of the "electronic elsewhere"; an invisible utopian realm generated and accessed through the electronic medium (57). The 19th century celebration of the telegraph is representative for a desire of seamless mediation between the material and immaterial, and such an idea is no stranger from the 1980s enthusiasm for cyberpunk and the possibility of immersion into virtual realities. The telegraph and the wireless technology invented by Guglielmo Marconi in the late 19th century represented a technical means of existing within the ether, of attaining the dream of universal communication. The cross-time and space communication between two bodies inspired a sense of kinship with an "invisible, scattered audience" and played on the "initial fascination with radio as a form of electronically disembodied consciousness, calling to earth across the void of space through the void of eternity" (93).

However, the popularisation of broadcasting schedules and the mass distribution of radios produced a rupture in the imaginaries of electronic utopias, and prompted a Heideggerian suspicion

of the radio as a form of mass control, as "invisible puppet strings with the potential to manipulate the earth's docile population" (94). Sconce does not elaborate on the biopolitical implications of the radio's sway over the people, i.e. how the governance of the population as a living, biological whole might be affected by it. It is also unclear whether the immateriality inherent in the medium can be tied in any way to the constitution of the docile mass. And yet, it is possible to relate this early-twentieth century anxiety to current discourses on the alienating and deindividualising effects of communications technologies, such as the Internet, in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

John Durham Peters's writings on mediums and technologies of communications are remarkably similar in tone to Sconce's account. Peters describes communication as a "registry of modern longings", and a "utopia of uninhibited expression", which is nonetheless interwoven with the spectre of social dereliction and disconnection (2). He also sees communication as deeply and intimately human, which makes his theories closer to the human rather than the nonhuman aspect of technologies of communication. For Peters, ""communication", whatever it might mean, is not a matter of improved wiring or freer self-disclosure but involves a permanent kink in the human condition" (29). More than that, communication entails a sharing of inner experience, and its dehumanisation has resulted from its annexation by the media of modern culture and its tools: the newspaper, radio, television and so on (33). The inhumanity of communication, for Peters, seems to stem from the introduction of mass communication, a view shared by Sconce, as mentioned above.

More recently, various forms of haunted media have become somewhat of a widespread phenomenon across the Internet. 'Creepypasta', stories that circulate online through the act of copying and pasting, are an eminent example of media that haunts– as bits of haunting affect, as well as being in a constant state of circulation. Henriksen's research on 'Creepypasta' articulates the connection between "embodied internet users . . . and the spectres of virtual reality through the movement of infectious circulation and hunts for spectres" (41). Media, such as images, videos or sound files, become the uncanny villains in these stories, hounding and haunting the user who sees them and often forcing her to pass on the infection to others.

In contrast to these rather romantic alliances between media and the inhuman and unearthly, phenomena such as media addiction seem dry and prosaic. In various instances, medical and cognitive research has tentatively, but not definitively, concluded that there might be a pathological condition along the lines of media addiction. Internet addiction is one instance, obsessive gaming another, and many more are easily discovered by leafing through the pages of journals such as *Cyberpsychology.* But, as evident from Derrida's work, the quintessence of spectres does not seem to lie in their supernatural ontology, but in that "they are always there . . . even if they do not exist, even if they are no longer, even if they are not yet" (221). And despite the apparent tameness of new media, the spectre of media addiction has never ceased to haunt.

The spectrality of addiction

Lisa Gitelman notes that media have always "emerged and existed in ways that both challenge and regulate notions of what it means to be human" (Gitelman and Pingree xix). Not simply because media content facilitates the sedimentation of norms of behaviour (self-presentation, beauty, intellect

etc.), but also because the very existence of media as material-symbolic assemblages serves as a means for troubling definitions and aspects of humanity. Gitelman's example is the role of the phonograph in the study of primate communication, which has led to questioning whether language is a solely human attribute.

There are an abundance of examples of discourse on how media determine humanity, but what they have in common is a commitment to placing the human at the centre of their analysis. New materialist theory advocates a reversal of this trend. Karen Barad, amongst other neomaterialists, seeks to reconfigure the human "away from the central place of explanation, interpretation, intelligibility, and objectivity to make room for the epistemic importance of other material agents" (Calvert-Minor 124). If the human is no longer considered to be the source and centre of all knowledge, it means that there is a need for a new understanding of the human and her place within the world and its relations. New materialism can re-ontologise the human, media, and the relationship between the two – it can, and must – reinterpret the categorical boundaries that separate them. In the case of media studies, instead of answering the question of 'how do media change humans', a neomaterialist approach to media studies would construct a different set of questions: how do we change alongside with media? What is the difference between us and media?

However, given the historical precedent of media that can endanger the constitution of the human, one must consider what such a re-ontologisation would do to phenomena such as the discourse on media addiction. A fear of the loss of self, of desubjectivisation and mourning of traditional values is already embedded into the very phenomenon of media addiction. The media addict is unpresent; disconnected from material reality and its demands. Media allows her to be absent from the present, to be 'alone together' in Turkle's words. Reframing the media addict through a neomaterialist lens might lead to strengthening the fears of those who blame media for the deterioration of the social. The media addict is spectral because she is never quite there, not committed enough to materiality: she prefers to lose herself in the supposed immateriality of the medium, instead of enjoying her own physicality and connection to the 'material' world.

Media addiction is a spectral phenomenon because it seems to haunt understandings of media and technologies of communication. However, if spectres are dangerous partly because of their immateriality, maybe the task of new materialism is not just to prove how matter matters, but also that all spectres are intensely material. Media addiction is the tension that arises between the acknowledgment that "new media can be viewed as an endeavour to improve on human capabilities" (Gitelman and Pingree xx) and its simultaneous haunting by that which is inhuman.

Fitzpatrick observed in the case of older media that the new forms of communication signify a loss of traditional values and understandings of the body, the social and the role of the human within the order of things, nature and culture (20). Once new technologies[2] of communication like the telegraph were introduced, they brought on the threat (as well as promise) of the disassociation of body and consciousness (Sconce 7). The printed book, the telegraph, and the radio all prompted concerns over their effects on a macro social and micro social level. The question that was asked was how does technology change us? The underlying assumption was that there exists a unidirectional relation between humans and technology, which can be interpreted as an ontological separation of the

two. Humanity and the technological are two separate spheres, as different from one another as nature from culture, or subject from object.

Discourse on media where the human/technological separation is enforced often focuses on the affective state of the addict, who establishes an improper kind of relationship to the medium and technology of communication. As the non-specialist descriptions of Internet addiction provided by Feldman suggest, the machine is more often a simple facilitator of other objects of pleasure such as the act of gambling, watching pornography, shopping and so on. But that does not necessarily have to exclude the possibility of the machine itself becoming the object of affective engagement, in which the human and the media form a harmonious entanglement that can result in a redefinition of both. However, if popular culture is any reflection of how technology-human bonds work, the prognosis is less idyllic: technologies of media have all too often the power to destroy.

Dangerous mediation

In a technological-determinist spin, the emergence of new technologies of communication gave rise to paranoia of mass mind control, changes in the body and psyche of the user, or evocations of alien presences (inhuman, nonhuman, formerly human). In certain instances, the dangers of some media of communication were confined to a specific portion of the population: for example, the mediality of novels has been deployed as a way of regulating eighteenth and nineteenth century middle-class womanhood. Reading novels was considered to be dangerous for women in the English speaking world of the time, to the point where (white, middle-classed) women's reading became a site of inscription for cultural and sexual anxieties (Pearson 1) – this particular case, of course, is just another instance of an ambivalent reaction to the medium of communication, in which the medium itself was alternately seen as a symbol and an anathema to traditional values.

The spectre represents a space between the subject and object, a state of neither and both (Murray 3), therefore an entity of uncertain nature: it is not quite bodily, but neither entirely immaterial. The media addict entails a similar kind of confusion: she embodies the contemporary fear of unpresence and deindividualisation. In the past, this loss of self has been pinned on novels, telegraphic communication, and even typewriting.[3] In the present context, if one was to look at works such as Nicholas Carr's critiques of online presence, as well as at the many memoirs of Internet and gaming addiction available on Amazon, it is quite noticeable that they all share a nostalgia for a less technologised past and for more genuine human relationality. They share an anxiety over how the media can make humans less *human* than they used to be. Discourse on technology and media addictions such as Internet Addiction, as well as convergent medical categories like ADD, can be seen as a symptom of this contemporary anxiety over digital technologies. These conditions are constructed on the premise that the individuals suffering from them become unable to fulfil their roles as (re)productive members of society. When it comes to the link between technology use and pathology, many popular and scientific inquiries gravitate towards key terms such as isolation, anti-social behaviour, or sociophobia – all of which allow a potently (and negatively) biopolitical reading of cases such as Internet Addiction.

Internet addiction can often sound like the twenty-first century equivalent of the nebulous medical conditions that worked as catch-all medical categories in the past. In this sense, Internet addiction is akin to female hysteria in the past—a condition with no reasonably ascertainable causes, symptoms or treatments, which was used as a mechanism for the regulation of gender norms, rather than anything else. In the same vein, Internet addiction, as well as other media addictions, does not have a universal definition, and its meaning tends to vary depending on the argument that it purports to support (for example, the symptoms of the Internet addiction that Chinese teenagers supposedly experience will be markedly different from the self-diagnosed Internet addiction of a white middle-class American man).

Based on news items and quasi-medical research, a lot of people seem to be afflicted with Internet addiction. Yet, there is a rather vague set of symptoms attributed to it, and it is unclear how one catches it, and what can be done to get rid of it or steer clear from it. According to popular wisdom, Internet addiction can encompass such diverging conditions such as addiction to Internet porn, addiction to computer games, cybersex, online auctions or simply surfing the web (Feldman). Regardless of whether these conditions are a legitimate cause of worry, what is intriguing is the way in which they are all pushed under the umbrella of the Internet. Medical research, as well as self-help websites or manuals, treat the Internet as more than a mediator in the traditional sense—as a neutral means through which the human user gains access to the activities which enslave her. The Internet, in many accounts, seems to be endowed with an agency of its own. It is not the act of gambling or auctioning, which incidentally happen to take place through a website instead of in real life, which trigger and feeding the addiction; it is the Internet itself which turns gambling, gaming or reading the newspaper into an addiction. In other words, it is the Internet, or rather the technological conditions that allow the Internet to exist, that are marked as the cause of addictive behaviour.

Medical researchers at the University of Bonn in Germany are exploring the possibility that Internet addiction might have some underlying genetic causes—a mutation in the same gene that also causes nicotine addiction (Montag et al.). The inclusion of Internet addiction into genetic research might herald its future stake in the management of the population's health, and even the creation of a new language of pathological technology use that will confirm the suspicions of self-styled pop experts such as Feldman.

Media addiction might sound like a trifle in comparison to seemingly more serious (and potentially deadly) addictions, such as drug or nicotine addiction. However superficial the term itself might be, it could have some very interesting implications for current biopolitics, or in other words, the governance of life. Biopolitics "is a mode of organizing, managing, and above all regulating 'the population', considered as a biological, species entity" (Thacker 9). Biopower, an intrinsic part of biopolitical governance, refers to techniques and practices, mostly situated within various social institutions, through which the management of life is achieved. A medical research body publishing about the correlation between Internet use and child ADHD would function as a gesture of biopower. These gestures need not be imperatives in order to shape the behaviours, attitudes and beliefs of a population. As opposed to laws for example, malaises such as media addiction/anxiety function on the basis of suggestion and sedimentation, rather than coercion. Traditional media themselves play a

crucial role in the dissemination of these gestures, even to the point of irony. Online newspapers and media outlets publish popularised accounts of medical research on the potential causes of media addiction, or the development of attention deficit disorders in children who watch too much television.

There are two aspects that merit attention within this mechanism of belief dissemination: the way in which the architecture of the Internet is germane to the process of dissemination (by allowing them to become contagious–to be shared in a viral manner), and the way in which the affective work that allows the belief to be ingrained into the social fabric takes place through the medium, while often working against the medium. In other words, malaise over the possibility of media addiction is an affective encounter. It speaks of the destabilisation and "neglect obligations and responsibilities" (Wright), and of the computer's power to "take you away from what you are supposed to be doing and what you want to accomplish" (Feldman). The body of the addict becomes tied to the machine to the extent that it becomes unable to fulfil her role within the biopolitical system. Kimberly Young, a psychologist whose work centres on Internet addiction, argues that the symptoms of an Internet addict are the impossibility to fulfil personal obligations and responsibilities, lack of meaningful interpersonal relationships, family discord and financial debt, among others (216). Many researchers and online self-help resources are quick to point out that there is a difference between extensive Internet use and addiction, but the line between the two is far from clear. Spending 'a lot' of time on the Internet in the interest of work or study figures as a part of a person's productive life, while browsing for pleasure, for 'feelings of euphoria during Internet usage' becomes a problem, especially if they stand in the way of a 'healthy life of moderation, happiness, and productivity, free from addiction and loneliness', according to the website of the *A Forever Recovery* program, a clinic dedicated to helping recovering addicts.

Conclusion

Media are not simple, and neither are the processes through which they emerge; the meanings and uses attributed to them, their glitches and errors, or the relations into which they become entangled along with elements such as humans, economies, cultures, systems of knowledge etc. It is the relations that take shape between all these aspects that are crucial in understanding singular aspects of media-human relations, such as media addiction. From a very straightforward point of view, most media (in a traditional sense) are machines. Typewriters, televisions, computers, but even musical instruments, the act of speaking or engaging one's body in the movements of a dance–all media involve materiality and processes of materialisation. In other words, they are machinic assemblages.

The media's propensity to lead towards unpresence and bodily loss signifies not only a concern for the integrity of the subject, but also for the intersubjective; the relations between subjects which constitutes the fabric of society. When the subject's relation to media becomes corrupt, the subject herself begins to disintegrate, thus endangering the rest of the social assemblage as well. Networked media are not the only ones guilty of posing this type of threat. For Plato, the written word for constituted an opening towards the outside, leading people away from a desired state of

anamnesis, of thinking within oneself (Stiegler 6)—or, of preserving the boundaries of one's subjectivity. The printing press was a threat to the sovereign by establishing a democracy of knowledge, of disseminating it to those who are unworthy of it by virtue of their class, race or gender, as can be concluded from the French philosopher, Marquis de Condorcet's thoughts that the printing press would unmask and dethrone the tyranny of priests and kings (Guillory 325). Media archaeologists such as Peters or Sconce cite anxieties centred on information leakages caused by posted letters falling into wrong hands, telegraphs and telephones that could be hacked or could create a space for malicious masquerades, or the fear over the radio becoming a tool of mass dissemination and therefore of mass control. What went over the wires, to whom it went to, and whether it could be contained within its proper locus without spilling into the outside are concerns that have resonated with several media ecologies over history, from the distribution of the written word, through the 'Victorian Internet' of telegraph technologies, to modern digital technologies where the threat of losing the self is ever-present.

To haunt originates from the old French verb hanter, that is, to frequent habitually, to busy oneself with, to take part in. Supernatural connotations aside, the figuration of the spectre such as it appears in Derrida's hauntology, as well as it pops up in Karen Barad's posthuman performativity of matter, is a way of talking about recurring patterns of entanglement with technology and with media. Digital media is spoken of as 'new media', often ignoring the way it is haunted by previous human-media entanglements. The media addict is no ontological novelty, it is a hauntological entity instead, one in which the inseparability of presence and absence, human and nonhuman, and even organic and inorganic is made visible. Barad uses the notion of quantum entanglements to express this kind of spectrality:

> ... the intertwining of two (or more) states/entities/events, but a calling into question of the very nature of two-ness, and ultimately of one-ness as well. Duality, unity, multiplicity, being are undone. 'Between' will never be the same. One is too few, two is too many. No wonder quantum entanglements defy commonsense notions of communication 'between' entities 'separated' by arbitrarily large spaces and times. Quantum entanglements require/inspire a new sense of a-count-ability, a new arithmetic, a new calculus of responseability (sic) (252).

From authors such as Turkle and Carr, to pop experts like Feldman, who peddle recovery programs for media addicts, it seems like concern for media addiction is growing among thinkers of technology. As vague as it is from a conceptual point of view, media addiction is also becoming consequential enough to catch the attention of genetic research programmes. Clearly, media addiction is a problem, although an ill-defined one. More than that, it is not a problem typical of the contemporary age. As shown above, a genealogical link can be established between past problematic human-media relations, and current media addictions, which suggests that addictions, or rather problematic relationships between humans and media, are a recurring topos in the history of technology. Media that allow mass communication, that transgress the limitations of space and time, who are able to hide the body or the voice of their users, trigger a fear that seems to have been haunting Western societies for a while. Media allow the proliferation of ghosts, and more than that, they have the power to create ghosts: the

media addict, the human who is bodily present but who can slip into unpresence by forgetting her body and by forsaking the relationalities that make her human in order to commune with the medium instead.

Thus, the prevailing discourse on media addiction depicts it as a plague that haunts and infects everything we say and think about media. In its turn, media have the potential to haunt, hunt and infest the users with whom it becomes entangled. What this article has laid out is an ontological/hauntological consideration of the phenomenon of media addiction, with the guidance of Derrida's hauntology, Barad's posthumanism, and insights from media archaeology. New materialist approaches were also touched upon, as a possible means of rehabilitating the notion of media addiction, of rescuing it from its noxious connotations. Somewhat like the obsessive woman reader's passion, media addiction spreads and is passed on through affective ties and through the transmission of media artefacts of various sorts. And like the spectres of Marxism that haunt us even after the purported end of history, it does not disappear even if it might sometimes be unacknowledged.

Notes

¹ According to the "Online Etymology Dictionary".

² 'New' in a loose sense. As Wendy Chun explains, the 'newness' of any kind of medium already implies a sense of repetition, and no 'new' media can ever be considered as a singularity (Chun 4).

³ According to Heidegger, in *The Question Concerning Technology.*

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