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## Clipping

(Professor Nicholas Royle, University of Sussex)

Listen to this:

You stand at the table shuffling papers and you drop something. Only you don't know it. It takes a second or two before you know it and even then you know it only as a formless distortion of the teeming space around your body. But once you know you've dropped something, you hear it hit the floor, belatedly. The sound makes its way through an immense web of distances. You hear the thing fall and know what it is at the same time, more or less, and it's a paperclip. You know this from the sound it makes when it hits the floor and from the retrieved memory of the drop itself, the thing falling from your hand or slipping off the edge of the page to which it was clipped. It slipped off the edge of the page. Now that you know you dropped it, you remember how it happened, or half remember, or sort of see it maybe, or something else. The paperclip hits the floor with an end-to-end bounce, faint and weightless, a sound for which there is no imitative word, the sound of a paperclip falling, but when you bend to pick it up, it isn't there. (89-90)

This passage appears at the beginning of Chapter 6 of Don DeLillo's little masterpiece *The Body Artist* (2001). I say 'passage', but it might be more apt to call it a clipping.

We are living in a new era of haunting, one in which (as the essays published here suggest) we find ourselves engaging with the 'ethics of the spectral text', 'spectral and textual haunting', and 'ghostly narrative' (as distinct from narrative *about* the ghostly). Such phrases themselves tell a story or at least evoke a disorder that is in keeping with this new era. They are new kinds of phrases: they seek a place, a haunt, in which spectrality cohabits with writing, text and narrative, as well as with the question of ethics.

You have to move very fast. Everything is just clipping by. That's what is at issue in this new era in which hauntology replaces ontology and increasing spectralization is the disorder of the day.<sup>1</sup> As Jacques Derrida remarks: "Ghosts always pass quickly, with the infinite speed of a furtive apparition, in an instant without duration, presence without present of a present which, coming back, only *haunts*" (*Mémoires* 64). Writing has to catch that, clip it, somehow. We need to respond, to be responsible to the appearances or apparitions of this speed, to produce a writing (it doesn't matter in this respect whether it is literary, critical, political, or something else) that seeks to be responsible. This is also the very business of DeLillo's work, the way it busies itself with so many possibilities of what *The Body Artist* on one occasion refers to as "clipped delivery" (50).

Of course the disorderliness of haunting is not new. It is inscribed in the word itself. The *OED* provides a charming illustration. Under the heading for 'haunt' as a verb, the editors relate it to the 12<sup>th</sup> century French '*hante-r*', noting this to be 'of uncertain origin'. The editors are, therefore, obliged to declare: 'From the uncertainty of the derivation, it is not clear whether the earliest sense in F[rench] and Eng[lish] was to practise habitually (an action, etc.) or to frequent habitually (a place). The order here is therefore provisional.' Action or place? 'Haunt' disorders or haunts the very order in which the dictionary, and its 'editorial principles', provisionally proceed.

Likewise to refer to *The Body Artist* as a masterpiece might seem a familiar, even old-fashioned gesture. We might here, however, recall and try to weigh up the specificity of Derrida's characterization, in what has become the great ghostbook of our time, *Spectres of Marx*: "A masterpiece always moves, by definition, in the manner of a ghost" (18).<sup>2</sup>

The masterpiece is a thing of genius, he suggests, in that it ‘seems to *engineer itself* [s’ingénier]’. With this verb *s’ingénier* Derrida plays on the links between genius and engineering, intimating the haunt of an *engine-room* for great writing, writing that haunts in being responsive to haunting. The masterpiece or great work is “like an elusive spectre’, Derrida goes on, it ‘*engineers* [s’ingénie] a habitation without proper inhabiting, call it a *haunting*, of both memory and translation” (*Spectres* 18).

The clipping from DeLillo is an extraordinary re-creation, act and archive, of ‘memory and translation’. Coming at the start of a chapter, it seems cut off from all that precedes it and it ends with a gap, a skipped line that invisibly *underlines* its clipped status, its separation from the book in which it is located. How to translate or clip it? (To clip is to embrace, to hold closely, to fasten, but also to cut, to reduce or cut short, in particular to cut words short, to move, fly or run quickly, to form or mark by clipping.) It’s in the present tense but it is ghostly narrative. You don’t know who the subject is. It’s only *you*. You don’t know who is narrating either: point of view is up in the air. There’s only you. ‘You stand at the table shuffling papers and you drop something. Only you don’t know it.’

DeLillo’s is an art of clipping. How do you describe (remember and translate) the sound of a paperclip falling? As Pamela Thurschwell has recently argued, falling is a central topos in DeLillo’s writing.<sup>3</sup> We might think most immediately of the falling of the Twin Towers on ‘9/11’ and *Falling Man* (2007); but everything in a sense is already being re-created here, in the falling of this paperclip in *The Body Artist*. What is the time of the fall? When do you know it or remember it? What is it to

know or remember or think you know or remember, ‘belatedly’, in a time out of joint? And how should you describe ‘a sound for which there is no imitative word’? You listen to the clipping, and it’s *you* you are listening to.

Nothing falls into place, and everything is susceptible to standing in for something else, starting with ‘you’. A page or so later we are presented with a sort of repetition, at once a displacement and substitution of the paperclip, when the body artist herself is said to see something “out of the corner of her eye [...] eerie and birdlike, but maybe not a bird” (91). She will never know what it was: “She saw it mostly in retrospect because she didn’t know what she was seeing at first and had to re-create the ghostly moment, write it like a piece of fiction [...]” (ibid.). Is the moment ghostly in the first place, or ghostly because it has to be re-created, or ghostly because it is like fiction? And is it *ghostly* for the body artist (the word ‘ghostly’ to be understood, then, from her ‘point of view’, to be heard or imagined in her voice)? Or is ‘ghostly’ the narrator’s word? (DeLillo’s novel is a new and singular engineering feat of ‘telepathic narration’.<sup>4</sup>) This ‘ghostly moment’ comes to reanimate or ‘re-create’ the evocation of the falling paperclip, and vice-versa. To think about this is, in a strange, perhaps twisted simile, to ‘write it like a piece of fiction’. DeLillo’s insistently present-tense description of the falling paperclip reverses and anachronizes, clipping, as if ‘slipping off the edge of the page’. With ‘the infinite speed of a furtive apparition, in an instant without duration, presence without present’, the clip is the mark of what the novel elsewhere calls “overlapping realities” (82).

*The Body Artist* is concerned with ghosts in a relatively traditional sense, in other words with the ways in which a loved one doesn’t die

when he (or she) dies: ghosts are about mourning, refused or impossible. And the text is also about more distinctively contemporary manifestations of spectrality, for example in the form of voice-recordings and webcams. But ghostliness in DeLillo's work is perhaps, above all, about the littlest things (a paperclip, for example) and the eerie ways in which this is connected to and disconnected from everything else. It is the ghostliness of describing this, the haunting of what it calls 'a piece of fiction' in a voice that is never one.<sup>5</sup>

In some respects, then, *The Body Artist* is in the lineage of that modern history of ghosts evoked by Virginia Woolf when she writes apropos the ghost stories of Henry James:

Henry James's ghosts have nothing in common with the violent old ghosts – the blood-stained sea captains, the white horses, the headless ladies of dark lanes and windy commons. They have their origin within us. They are present whenever the significant overflows our powers of expressing it; whenever the ordinary appears ringed by the strange. (324)

But spectralization in the writing of *The Body Artist* is working at a new pitch, with new combinations (clipping together the paperclip, the 'eerie and birdlike', proliferation of voice-recordings, ventriloquism and impersonation, while knowing and showing there is no clip: it's a dream or hallucination of fiction), engineering a new radiophony. It's a question of what I have elsewhere called 'reality literature', a new engagement with the responsibilities of thinking about spectrality and writing.<sup>6</sup> I suggest that reality literature might be traced back, in English, at least as far as James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824), and provides a way of thinking about the work of contemporary writers such as Hélène Cixous. It's a sort of mad oxymoron, a twisted tautology, like a clipping that would *form or mark*

*by clipping*. Reality literature has to do with texts that are haunted, in other words those kinds of literary work which, as Derrida has said,

all have in common [the fact] that they are inscribed in a *critical* experience of literature. They bear within themselves, or we could also say in their literary act they put to work, a question, the same one, but each time singular and put to work otherwise: ‘What is literature?’ or ‘Where does literature come from?’ ‘What should we do with literature?’ (“Strange Institution” 41)

The paper cannot be held together, anymore than could an electronic sheaf of essays about haunting. ‘The paperclip hits the floor with an end-to-end bounce, faint and weightless, a sound for which there is no imitative word, the sound of a paperclip falling, but when you bend to pick it up, it isn’t there.’

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> On hauntology as distinct from ontology, see Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. Moreover, spectrality here is not confined to the human: for a remarkable account of spectralization and (non-human) animals, see Lippit, *Electric Animal: Toward a Rhetoric of Wildlife*.

<sup>2</sup> The original French here reads: “*Un chef-d’œuvre toujours se meut, par définition, à la manière d’un fantôme*” (42). The French for ‘masterpiece’, *chef-d’œuvre*, carries with it associations of the head (and thus of headlessness, of the *caput*, capital, capitalization, capitalism and decapitation) that Derrida explores at length in *Spectres of Marx* and numerous other texts, from *Glas* to “Telepathy” to *The Other Heading* and beyond.

<sup>3</sup> See Thurschwell, “Forecasting Falls: Icarus from Freud to Auden to 9/11” (forthcoming).

<sup>4</sup> For more on ‘telepathic narration’, permit me to refer to “The ‘Telepathy Effect’: Notes toward a Reconsideration of Narrative Fiction.”

<sup>5</sup> On these and related topics, cf. Naas’s reading of DeLillo’s novel, “House Organs: The Strange Case of the Body Artist and Mr. Tuttle.” Naas explores the ways in which “*The Body Artist* is a work that implicitly questions the very possibility of ever speaking with just *one* voice, of ever having a single, *indivisible* body, and of ever dwelling within a house that is *one’s own*” (93).

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sussexlecturesarchive/audio/royle.mp3>

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