A warning to the curious: ghost signs as liminal memento-mori

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See the accompanying slides that relate to the text below. For a complementary reflection on ghost signs, liminality and macabre art, see this post on my liminalnarratives blog.

Slide 1 – Title Slide

Slide 2

Look above and you will see them. Faded, pallid imprints on brick and stone.

An advert perhaps. No longer shouting but murmuring about long-forgotten brands: cigarettes, flour, razors.

Or a proclamation of former use and occupancy: grocer, wholesaler, tripe-dresser.

These are ghost-signs. And, as Sydney Shep observed, they act as ‘vestiges of spaces and places, industries and individuals’ that tell stories of ‘history, identity, cultural memory, desire, nostalgia and erasure’. (Shep, 2015)

And this is what I am going to talk about. Ghost signs

But first some background.

I work full-time for a global law firm. I am also two years into a (very) part-time PhD at City University researching organisational storytelling and the extent to which this activity is situated, and drawn towards, liminal spaces.

As part of my wider studies, I blogged about ghost signs. I was intrigued by their liminality and their role as organisational memento-mori.
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It struck me that while ghost signs have an enthusiastic following on social media, academic interest has, to date, been muted.

So, in this talk, I will explore:

- the liminality of ghosts and ghosts signs – and the ways we materially engage with them
- how they flex time and, in doing so, gift us an organisational warning
- and how, as *memento mori*, their ancestors – the medieval macabre art of the three living and the three dead – ambiguously suggest not only organisational decay and dissolution but also possible continuity

We’ll also see how this continuity may involve a vampiric relationship between new businesses and the old and the possibility of organisational resurrection.

Slide 4

Before I focus on ghost signs, let’s consider ghosts as creatures of the liminal. The liminal, following the research of Van Gennep and Victor Turner, is characterised by ambiguity, confusion, flux, marginality, disorientation, transgression, alterity and liberation.

It is shifting, fluid, never wholly glimpsed or knowable. Pors, Olaison and Otto (2019) note that a feature of ghostly matters is the unsettling, the disturbance of fixed categorisations and categories. Things become unmoored from that which anchors them.

Rosemary Jackson, in *Fantasy: the literature of subversion* claims that ghosts ‘elide the distance between the actual and the imagined...so that frail and cherished distinctions collapse’ (1981). This classificatory uncertainty is a key feature of the liminal phase. Turner notes that in a rite of passage – in which a child passes to adulthood perhaps – the liminars are ‘no longer classified and not yet classified’ (1967). They slip the network of classification that locates them in cultural space.

The liminal is where we are ‘betwixt and between’. It carries the tang of ambiguity and paradox.

Ghosts, as Tim Edensor notes, defy binary oppositions (Edensor, 2005). They collapse and enfold many boundaries: those of past, present and future; absence and presence; material and immaterial. They are neither living nor dead; and both living and dead.

This echoes the symbolism attached to the liminal persona: the moon (for it both waxes and wanes); snakes (who shed then grow new skin) and nakedness (exhibited by both the new-born baby and the corpse prepared for burial).
If ghosts are inherently liminal, they are also drawn to, and haunt, spaces and geographies that are, themselves, liminal.

In analysing Henry James’ *The Turn of the Screw*, Sandor Klapcsik (2012) observes that the ghosts in the text – although we are never sure to what extent they *are* ghosts – are only perceived within the liminal: outside of windows, at the top of towers, on the roofs of houses.

If we turn to James’ namesake, M.R. James, beaches play an integral role in two of his classic ghost stories: *Oh, whistle and I’ll come to you* and *A warning to the curious*. And this centrality is not accidental. Bjorn Thomassen identifies seashores and beaches as archetypal liminal landscapes (2012). This is a trickster margin between land and sea, eternally shifting shape as the tides contest, claim and reclaim.

Several decades later and following, literally, in the steps of M.R. James, author and academic W.G. Sebald walked the same East Anglian countryside in his novel/memoir/travelogue: *Rings of Saturn*.

John Wylie writes of Sebald’s ‘spectral geographies’ (2007). These are spaces infused by the uncanny – that feeling of unease when something familiar is infiltrated by the strange and unfamiliar. And, as Nicholas Royle asserts, thresholds, liminality, margins, borders are closely associated with the uncanny (2003).

Ghost signs also haunt the margins of many zones. Fixed categories mirage before our eyes. For Shep, ghost signs ‘exist at the convergence of topography, typography and temporality’ (2015). Even their very materiality is liminal as scouring wind, rain and pollution ‘transform the qualities of matter’ (DeSilvey and Edensor, 2013).

Edensor notes how the processes of decay mock any compulsion for order (2001). If we look at this ghost sign – on the pillar by a doorway in Spitalfields, London – decay and time efface and elide. Where does stone surface end and typeface begin? Decay deconstructs the boundariness of objects – they become something else. They are truly betwixt and between.

Degen and Hetherington see the ghostly as figures of ‘unfinished disposal’ (2001). And this, I believe, is true of our ghost signs – but in a slightly different way. For yes, some signs, neglected and uncared for, may fade to oblivion. But others are restored; made smart for contemporary eyes. And is that too a form of ‘disposal’? Or, more precisely, a form of exorcism?
Pors, Olaison and Otto also see ghostly matters as playing a part in the collapse of linear time. (2019). In the ghostly organisation, multiple temporalities exist.

And ghost signs too immerse us in this temporal dislocation. Edensor describes how ‘we perform the past by putting our bodies into its flow’ (2005). Describing the sensual experience of moving in a ruin, he notes the tactile crunch of broken brick and mortar; the skin feel and breath of dust and damp.

So, I aimed to experience this immersion through an informal auto-ethnographic experiment. I became the reflexive participant keen to slip the bodily shackles of the present and reanimate the past.

This walk was filmed just before 1pm on 1 May. May Day – a liminal time in the folklore calendar.

I am walking to a former pub – The Chequers. An outhouse still bears a ghost sign that bears the name of the pub – and the Brewery, Morgans – that owned it.

After recording this video, I paused to write down my feelings, impressions and senses. These are my notes:

‘It is hot and there is birdsong. I imagine that I am no longer in running shoes – but hobnailed, agricultural worker boots. I am hungry, having been working on the fields in the morning. Although the hill is slight, I feel the pull in calf and tendon. I am thirsty and sick of the fields and sun. I want beer to slake my thirst and to sit in the cool and dark: wood settle, stone pammment floor. As I see the sign, I feel relief, happiness, the ease of pause and rest.’

Edensor writes how his walks around ruined factories conjure up memories of his relatives who worked in such spaces: he notes how ghosts temporally take possession of bodies as they move through ruined space. I too feel possessed – but it is the ghost sign that has summoned these spirits: the ghostly, involuntary memories of all those ancestors who worked as agricultural labourers, poultry dealers, well-diggers and shepherds on the borderlands – the limen - of Norfolk and Suffolk.
Ghosts are also betwixt and between time. They confuse ideas of past, present and future – most literally in Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*. Ghost signs too cause temporalities to coalesce. They show us that which ‘appeared to be not there’ (Edensor, 2005) — for example, Morgan’s Ales, a beer last drunk in the 1960s.

In his reflections on the ghost signs of Adelaide, Stefan Schutt explains how they reanimate the past and, in doing so, ‘transfer the present’ (Schutt, 2017).

They warn of what awaits us. Edensor describes the mirthless irony of ghost signs faded to indecipherability: they mock the energy expended on fixing meaning through branding and advertising.

This irony is demonstrated if I pan back from the photo here. A sign on a wall by Old Street Station, on the northern border of the City of London.

Ghost signs whisper that all things must pass: brands, products, services, organisations. For example, Morgan’s Ales are no more. In 1961 they went into voluntary liquidation with the pubs and brewery sold to larger competitors.

We are complacent in our organisations – comforted by the diurnal rhythm of the work we do; the services we offer; the products we make. But ghost signs teach us that organisations and institutions rise and fall. Products and brands come and go. They are eternally poised on the *limens* – the threshold to oblivion.

I took this photo in Glasgow on the 15 June 2018 at 5.52pm. We were in Glasgow for my daughter’s graduation from Glasgow School of Art – which we attended in the morning.

As you can see the name on this ghost sign is Woolworths, the retail chain which, at its peak, was a mainstay of the UK high street. But by 2015, Woolworths Group plc was officially dissolved with the closure of 807 stores and the loss of 27000 jobs.
Twenty minutes earlier, I took this photo. It shows the celebrated Macintosh Building at Glasgow School of Art. On the 23 May 2014, fire destroyed the west wing of the building. A careful restoration process followed and, at the graduation ceremony that morning, the governors spoke movingly of how the Mac – as it is affectionately known – was scheduled to reopen in 2019. That very week, as you can see from the photo, the scaffolding had begun to come down.

At 11.30 that evening, walking back to our hotel after a celebratory dinner, we saw plumes of smoke and a red glow in the distance.

The Mac had caught fire again – an even more devastating fire than the first with the initial reports speculating that it was totally destroyed.

These photographs bring together two organisations: one commercial; the other, academic. And, looking at the photographs, was it too fanciful to imagine a dialogue between the two?

The Woolworths ghost sign, a minatory, half-ruined presence cautioning other institutions that they – and their material manifestations – are similarly vulnerable and subject to shocks: technological, social, economic, political and physical.

The ghost sign reveals the past speaking in the present to remind us of our transience and projecting to the future to show us what awaits us.

And these dialogues connect us to older dialogues; and these signs to older signs.

For if ghost signs act as contemporary memento-mori, we can learn more by examining their medieval ancestors.

The admonitory advice of the ghost sign can be summarised in the 12th century words of St Bernard of Clairvaux, quoted by Paul Binski in _Medieval death: ritual and representation_. Binski argues that the theme of worldly transience was deeply implicated in the emergence of the macabre – a period on European art that lasted for 300 years between 14th and 16th centuries.

And there is one motif within the macabre that pre-figures later ghost signs and provides resonance and context for what was to follow. It too warns against complacency, emphasises the ineluctability of change, stresses the criticality of mediating action and, in its physical manifestations, materialises the rise and fall of organisations. Yet this sign is also ambiguous.
The motif is the *Three Living and the Three Dead*. The story is a simple one. Three young men, often depicted as kings, are out hunting, dressed in their finery. They meet three, decomposing cadavers. A dialogue ensues in which the living express fear and mortification. In return, the dead exhort them to reflect on the transience of their lives and the foolishness of their behaviour.

In a medieval sense, the motif went viral.

These wall paintings of the motif are in the Norfolk parish churches of Seething and Wickhampton. They date from the early 15th century.

And these wall paintings – like ghosts and ghost signs – are deeply liminal.

The encounter is a dialogue - and a dialogue by means of a doubled self. Mark Fisher argues that the weird is the presence of something that should not be there. It is a ‘signal that the concepts and frameworks which we have previously employed are now obsolesce’ (p.13). Three decaying doppelgangers are not what our hunting kings expect to encounter.

And the disorientation continues.

Binski explains how the image is ternary: it implicates us as a viewer. We, as well as the three living, are the recipients of the message. We are both inside and outside the scene – we are betwixt and between.

We are also caught in a moment of instability between three temporal realms: as with the ghost signs, the past imposes on the present to warn of the future (which projects back into the present to affect conduct in the present and future).

The pictorial setting is also topographically liminal. A forest of bare, lifeless, skeletal trees. In their starkness, they mirror, to a modern eye perhaps, the shattered landscapes of Flanders. This is ‘no-man’s land’: a contested geography inhabited by both the living and the dead but to which neither can lay ultimate claim.

These wall paintings also – through their very materiality – speak of organisational change.

Many wall paintings were destroyed by puritan reformers or, as with Seething and Wickhampton, whitewashed over.
The zeal of the puritans is also visible in this scene of the Dance Macabre at nearby Sparham church. The eyes of the skeletal bride and bridegroom have been gouged out – a treatment usually afforded to icons of the saints.

You could argue that this material disfigurement – like the effacement of the wall paintings – both embodies and reflects organisational transition. A mature and established market incumbent – the Church of Rome – has fallen victim to a hostile takeover by a brash young start-up: Reformation plc.

It reminds us of the transience of organisational power and dominant market share.

But perhaps the message these ghosts bring is potentially more ambiguous.

This is an excerpt from the 15th century poem, The Three Kings – a retelling of the Three Living and the Three Dead – by John Audelay (translated by Giles Watson). The scene is vividly set:

‘And out of the grove, three men came into view:
Shadowy phantoms, fated to show,
With legs long and lean, and limbs all askew,
Their livers and lights all foetid.’

But these dead are not random corpses. As the title suggests, they too were kings which makes them ancestors of the living Kings.

Furthermore:

‘The first king is cringing, his heart overcast,
For he recognizes the cross on a rotting king’s shroud’

The heraldic symbol is familiar because it is his own. And the second dead king confirms the family connection.

We’re you’re fathers – salt of the earth – soon forgotten

So, intertwined with the theme of transition and change is that of continuity. And the warning here, as Ashby Kinch identifies, is: do not ignore or debase one’s lineage (2008).
Consequently, dissolution may not prove inevitable. And, of course, some of the ghost signs we see relate to products and companies that have survived.

Slide 18

For example, this ghost is still very much alive – the lineal line endures. But the message to its organisational descendants is, perhaps, ‘remember your brand legacy’.

Slide 19

Some ghost signs also exist to nourish the living. They are the undead sustaining the vampires that ingest their power and potency.

This photograph was taken in Spitalfields – home, since the 17th century, to successive ways of immigrant weavers and textile workers.

This part of London is shaped by cloth and fabric. They form its topographic weft and warp.

Let’s consider the shop. Ben Sherman is a clothing brand adopted by a range of youth cultures drawn to its iconic, traditional style.

Above the shop is a ghost sign. Was W. Wakefield a fruit and vegetable dealer associated with the nearby market? Or perhaps a textile warehouse and wholesaler? Either way, the sign references and embodies a commercial past that survives to this day.

And it is this message of legacy, endurance and tradition that Ben Sherman can vampirically feed upon to reinforce its own brand message. Like the dead king’s rotting shroud, the sign speaks of lineal continuity.

Slide 20

A final thought on ghost signs and survival.

A year ago, I went searching for a particular ghost sign in Clerkenwell, London. However, this sign advertising the now vanished black cat cigarettes brand has, itself, vanished. Completely hidden by a new residential block which shrouds it from view.

But not erased from existence. Although hidden, it merely sleeps: suspended between past, present and future; revelation and enclosure; communication and silence. And, as fashions change, perhaps the new apartments that conceal it will, in their turn, succumb to the demolition notice.
Then, as the wrecking ball strikes, the Black Cat – a typographical Sleeping Beauty – will wake again. And just as some deceased brands – like East Anglian beers, Lacons and Bullards (but alas not Morgans) – have risen like Lazarus from their corporate graves, so others may emerge blinking in the light.

For, in the final reckoning, our signs are indeed ghosts; but ghosts who speak not only of decay and negation but of continuity and even resurrection. And in this ambiguity, the ambivalence of their message, they are of course, truly liminal.

**Slides 21 and 22**


