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Abstract

Ghost tourism is big business in Scotland and in Edinburgh specifically. This paper is based off ethnographic fieldwork conducted with a number of the Scottish capital's ghost tour companies. It is primarily concerned with the performance and embodiment of spectrality by ghost tour guides, which is achieved through the use of theatrical techniques meant to immerse tour-goers into the ghostly. It is this immersion that marks ghost tours out as enchantment; a more special experience than the mundane manner of everyday existence, which goes some way to explaining the popularity of ghost tourism.

Keywords: Spectrality, Ghosts, Performance, Theatre, Immersion

Introduction:

The dead sell. Ghost walks exist in multiple cities across the UK (Clanton 2007; Holloway 2010; Hanks 2011). Inglis and Holmes (2003: 61) argue that 'the ghost seems increasingly to walk in every nook and cranny the tourism industry can find for it.' Scottish tourism is worth approximately £11.6 billion and growing, and over 10% of Scotland's employment is within the tourism sector (Holzhauser 2015). Whatever the truth of the paranormal may be, Scotland's tourism sector is benefitting from it.

Walking up the Royal Mile, Edinburgh's historic high street, it is easy to spot ghost tour guides amongst the crowds of people ordinarily found there during the summer months. Each

tour's representatives are a mixture of different ages, genders and nationalities, but they are all normally in costume. Some wear all black; a long velvet or leather trench coat with black boots and trousers. These can be complemented with a black hat or a walking cane depending on the guide's preference. Others attempt to replicate the clothing and appearance of those from the era that the tour guide's character is taken from. Some guides adopt the role of a locally famous historical figure. For example, City of Edinburgh tours have a guide that resembles the appearance of Major Weir, who in 1670 reportedly confessed to witchcraft and his ghost is rumoured to haunt his old home on West Bow (*The Scotsman* 2016).

Cohen (1985) divides a guide's role into leadership and mediation. The former includes guiding tour-goers around different planned routes, allowing them access to sites not open to the public, and maintaining group morale. The latter includes enabling interactions between visitors and points of interest (talking about landmarks, discussing significant events at different sites and such), the delivery of information, but also the selection and interpretation of this information. The guide, at a basic level, is one 'who leads the way through an environment in which his followers lack orientation or through a socially defined territory' (ibid.: 7). Edinburgh's ghost tour guides follow pre-planned routes which can involve access to otherwise inaccessible sites. Mercat Tours offer exclusive access to the Blair Street Underground Vaults, while City of the Dead are the only company allowed into the Black Mausoleum. Furthermore, they typically discuss locations such as the vaults, graveyards and houses of the Old Town in great detail, with a strong emphasis on 'how things were' or 'back then.' Primarily discussing historical sites and information means that Edinburgh's ghost tour guides do not only lead and guide their company through an unfamiliar space, but also through an unfamiliar time and specific historical setting.

This paper presents an ethnography of ghost tour guiding based on fieldwork carried out in the Scottish capital during the summer of 2018. I will investigate to what extent the tour guides are practitioners of hauntology; ‘a concern with apparitions, visions and representations that mediate the sensuous and the non-sensuous, visibility and invisibility, presence and absence, reality and not-yet-reality, being and non-being’ (Lincoln & Lincoln 2015: 192). Conceptualising hauntology for the first time, Jacques Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* was careful to separate “spirits” from “spectres”, as the latter ‘undertake[s] a kind of incarnation, to become a body, that is, to take on a material shape’ (McCallum 2007: 238) while spirits do not. I choose to collapse this opposition since, as I will illustrate, the blurring and incomplete manner of materiality and immateriality is what characterises ghosts as opposed to the full adoption of either state. This ethnography will reveal how embodied performances immerse tourists into enchanted and spectral experiences, with some guides adopting a semi-present state of both human and ghost, occupying a liminal state and space.

The Thing That Comes:

The first tour I went on was guided by a young woman called Roxanne, who had been leading her own group for Mercat Tours since March and was dressed head to foot in black. We (myself and other tour-goers) first gathered round in a circle by the Mercat Cross on the Royal Mile, the monument from which Mercat Tours draws its name. Roxanne led the tour around various points of interest around the Royal Mile, zig-zagging between different closes (narrow streets) on each side, telling the group historical vignettes or ghost tales at each stopping point. This journey took the group slowly towards the underground vault entrance, where we arrived half an hour later.

The vaults have been the subject of several studies over the years. Wiseman et al. (2005) conducted a rigorous paranormal investigation inside the Blair Street Vaults, concluding that people's expectations and beliefs in paranormal activity were secondary to environmental factors such as light and naturally occurring magnetic fields in determining behavioural responses within apparently haunted places. This study was referenced during the tour as we were taken through the rooms in ascending order, from least to most haunted. It is also discussed in Mercat's souvenir book, which proudly states that this remains 'the most systematic investigation of a haunted location in the world' (Geddes 2012: 40).

The tour is a walk around nine stone vaults connected by short archways. Other tour-goers would comment to me how 'stuffy' and sometimes 'claustrophobic' it felt. Roxanne did check with the group beforehand if anyone had breathing difficulties such as asthma, in case they would struggle with the air quality (or lack of it) once inside. Although structurally it is similar to what it would have been like during the 18th and 19th centuries, Roxanne explained that, to meet modern health and safety requirements, electricity had been installed so fire exits could be indicated and some low-level lighting had been introduced into some rooms. This proved necessary, as the cobbled ground was uneven at points and slippery from rainwater since the vaults were never waterproofed, so total darkness risked injuries to visitors. Rooms without lights were completely dark save for the dim candle the guide held in her hand.

Roxanne walked the group around each room, encouraging us to come close to her so we would hear what she was saying. She started in rooms that had occasional reports of ghost sightings, blending these reports with historical details about life in the vaults and facts about their construction. As the tour moved from room to room, the ghosts took a greater role in the

stories, until we were taken into what is known as the White Room – the most paranormally “active” room (Wiseman et al. 2005; Geddes 2012). Roxanne explained that this is the home of an evil spectre known as ‘The Watcher’, who reportedly causes watches or torches to stop working and even triggers physical pain in some visitors. She also told us, in a particularly malevolent and dramatic tone of voice, that The Watcher has a habit of blowing out candles... before blowing out her own candle and temporarily plunging the group into complete darkness. She waited, and then relit it a few moments later.

Talking to tour-goers afterwards, this moment of blowing out the candle was highlighted as a point where the ‘obviously well-rehearsed’ and ‘theatrical’ manner of the guide was clear to see. This moment of the tour, indeed the tour as a whole, parallels what Fischer-Lichte (1995: 86) means when she describes how avant-garde theatre movements ‘claimed to close the gap between art and life and to fuse theatre and reality’. The understanding of theatre expanded beyond the traditional stage, so ‘any kind of exhibitory, demonstrative or spectacular event’ (ibid.: 86) could now be understood as such. More specifically, environmental theatre conceptually broadened to incorporate street parades and processions among other things (Biggin 2017), and ghost tours fall within this classification. It makes sense therefore that tours feature guides who it seems are performing a rehearsed role.

I was able to discuss Roxanne’s job with her a couple of days later. She told me that she finds it very enjoyable and unlike her previous work. A history graduate, she had worked as a guide previously for another company, but Mercat Tours require her to bring a more ‘theatrical element’ to guiding which she was not experienced in before she started. She also recalled her first visit to the vaults:

I went into the vaults for the first time on a tour with a very good guide, and she created a really spooky atmosphere. I remember feeling quite uneasy, because it was very authentically creepy especially because of the stories and candlelit rooms.

It is an atmosphere that Roxanne herself is now tasked with regularly creating for visitors, which she does through the use of performative actions and techniques such as tone, costume and use of props like the candle. Clements (2013: 26) concludes that theatre is a 'ghosted practice' and stresses the 'repetitions, disappearances and reappearance' that characterise performance art. Derrida (1994: 98) repeatedly talks of how 'specters... come on stage', words that emphasise the close connection of spectrality and performance. Seeing Roxanne put on a kind of performance is therefore unsurprising. Combined with detailed and entertaining storytelling, this showmanship generates an anticipation of ghosts such as The Watcher. Derrida (1994: 4) describes the anticipation as 'at once impatient, anxious and fascinated: this, the thing... will end up coming.' The nervousness of the group is testament to the successful creation of morbid anticipation.

Although the performative aspect emerges as a crucial part of the ghost tour guide's role and a method for building expectations, not all guides attempt to be incredibly performative. Roxanne mentioned that, despite her candle moment in the White Room, her style is not overly theatrical and it would feel 'unnatural' for her to attempt otherwise. She says that while other guides are given scope to be much more dramatically expressive, she is equally allowed by the tour company to come across as more naturalistic. While my group saw Roxanne as well practiced, and she too acknowledges the theatrical aspects of her work, she does not see herself as an especially elaborate performer.

Stalking, Wandering and Not Belonging:

Rather than viewing tour guides' performances purely in terms of typical acting techniques – such as the use of voice and interaction with props – it makes more sense to view the guiding itself as described by Cohen (1985) in terms of a 'show.' More specifically, it makes sense to view ghost tours as examples of immersive theatre. Biggin (2017) notes that several understandings of immersive theatre exist, but they all centre on the "actor" and their audience occupying the same space and the latter being directly involved in the spectacle, in a setting that dissolves the separation of the two amidst an interaction dictated largely by the environment. All the walking ghost tours in Edinburgh's old town are like this. Roxanne was just one of many guides who try to keep themselves close to the tour-goers and only project their voices as much as necessary. This was often for practical reasons so that everyone could hear them, but this closeness contributes to the erasure of the performer-audience distinction.

Approaches to this differed depending on the size of the group. The Cadies and Witchery Tour had a very small crowd when I visited – there was no more than five or six of us. This allowed the guide to get much closer to the group than he would otherwise be able to do, and not just in terms of physical proximity. Before the tour began, he told the group where he was from and asked the visitors where they had come from, and received a range of answers from Argentina to South East England. His expectations of my prior knowledge of Scottish history rocketed when I told him I was from the Highlands, expectations that I embarrassingly failed to meet. The guide was able to break down the distinctions between performer and audience not just in terms of the physical space between the two, as seen in instances of immersive theatre in London (Biggin 2017; Luckhurst 2017), but by making himself a familiar figure having once been unfamiliar. He brought visitors into the experience by doing so, instead of maintaining the separation between "him" and "his group."

Most groups I joined were considerably bigger, and tour guides have to take a different approach in these instances. The Double Dead Tour is the longest and most expensive tour that City of the Dead offer. Its name comes from the fact that the tour takes visitors into the Niddry Street Underground Vaults and into the Covenanters' Prison, which are normally offered as two separate tours. When the guide Bruce took us into the vaults, he had to gather the group of forty or so in a low-ceiling room to tell us about "the Hellfire Club" – a notorious drinking gang that was active when the vaults were still used for accommodation and commercial purposes in the 1700s and 1800s. To do so, he got the group to encircle him, and holding his candle began to walk around the circle so everyone could periodically see him up close. Other than his dim flickering candlelight, the room was pitch black. As the wax on his candle would melt, he would let it drip onto his hand, seemingly without flinching. Beneath his storytelling I could hear members of the crowd whispering that the hot wax apparently did not hurt him (he must have had 'asbestos hands', one visitor exclaimed). His story included an account of a ghost that has been reportedly seen in these vaults, a ghost believed to be one of the deceased, destitute members of the Hellfire Club.

Here the immersion takes a more ambiguous form that shares similarities with the London-based Punchdrunk theatre company. Formed in 2000, Punchdrunk take pride in allowing 'audiences [to] experience epic storytelling inside sensory theatrical worlds' (Punchdrunk 2018) in the style of immersive theatre. Luckhurst (2017) notes how Punchdrunk's performers often make use of low tones of voice, inconclusive narratives and different spaces as a means to draw their audience in. Similarly here, Bruce never raised his voice or changed the pace of his speech, gave no verbal indication as to whether he believed that the ghosts were real, and led us around a number of different "spooky" locations. Immersion here however goes beyond words. Bruce wore all black, often making him hard to see in the

darkness of the vault. As he discussed the spirits that allegedly ‘stalk’ and ‘wander’ in the vaults, he himself wandered around the group, never looking at anyone directly and paying no attention to the hot wax until we left the room, at which point he peeled the partly set wax off his hand. The intended effect was clear; Bruce was mimicking the behaviour of the spectres he was talking about, suggesting (perhaps playfully) that he himself was a ghost.

Members of my group that I spoke to found this to be an incredibly effective storytelling technique. Tracey, a postgraduate psychology student, later told me about the impression that it left with her:

When he was telling the story in the underground vault room, and was walking around the circle holding a candle as the only light source, I thought it was dramatic but in a more understated way. Also, when he walked past you with the candle it disrupted your vision which made it feel like you might see something in the corner of your eye and freak yourself out.

Bruce’s method had the double effect of embodying a spectre and making visitors more cautious of what they might see, both of which depend heavily on Bruce’s control of lighting within the cramped room. It is a two-fold technique. The invoking of spectrality in the space is seen both in Bruce himself and the way that his movement, controlling the only light source in the vault, affected fields of vision and opened tour-goers up to the possibility of seeing ‘something’ beyond what is already present to them. Ghostliness is conjured both within and outside the performing body.

Casting the Spell:

To Lincoln and Lincoln (2015: 201), Bruce’s story would be an example of ‘secondary haunting’ as ‘they – and not the ghost – hail the audience and tell the story of sufferings past,

but they do so as a living subject who speaks on behalf of the dead, not as one caught on the border of life and death.’ This may describe written historical accounts, but is less accurate here. Robert, a council worker from Edinburgh that I got talking to during the tour, commented that he liked this moment in the vaults because Bruce was ‘able to best locate us as “visitors” to that place’ and give a distinct impression to the group that they didn’t belong there. Feeling like you do not belong in a place, but being there anyway, is one of the explorative and transgressive techniques used to build up excitement and anticipation within immersive experiences (Biggin 2017). Bruce deliberately constructed a situation where he was occasionally visible but also not visible, and where he seemed to look human but apparently showed no reaction to hot wax that would cause people pain. This embodiment of the spectral, the impression of being between life and death, projected the feeling that human visitors are ‘guests.’ Bruce ‘evoked the spacing between the life and death of an event... a space we might call the tension of the present tense’ (Thrift & Dewsbury 2000: 422) by speaking about (and as) someone who died long ago and who was involved in events that have long since become part of history. He performed an ambiguity that attempts to bring the spectral to the group. The guide makes what is immaterial material and what is absent present through this display.

When I got the opportunity to ask Bruce about why he adopts this approach, his answer was every bit as theatrical as his guiding:

There is nothing worse in God’s Green Earth than being responsible for a haunted story not having its desired effect. It will get you when you most don’t want it to and you will rue the day you failed it. Theatricality is the best weapon against the story having reason to get you. Told well it will leave you be. The stories tell me torture would be even more effective but I have been encouraged towards theatricality.

In Bruce's account, the rationale behind his work is that the stories have the agentic capacity to bring an unpleasant reckoning in his direction if he fails to do their content justice. Telling a ghost story means a lot more than adopting a scary voice in a dark room. Bruce performed these stories, and theatre is a ghosted practice. In a sense, Bruce transcended metaphor and became a ghost.

Crucial to this point is that there is more than one kind of ghost. Ghosts are typically imagined as tied down to specific locations and as a core characteristic of haunted historical places (Bell 1997). By contrast, the ghost that Bruce – and indeed the entire tour group, myself included – became is an invader, an alien, an unwelcome guest. Punchdrunk's spectators become ghosts through 'a sensation of not quite belonging' (Biggin 2017: 181) and by helping to form 'the constructed scenography and performance, or the ghost, that which is temporarily brought to the site' (Pearson 2012: 70). Narratives of Edinburgh's ghosts talk about active spirits showing hostility towards intruders. The Watcher in the Blair Street Vaults, Roxanne told us, once reportedly screamed at a woman to 'get out' multiple times. In the Black Mausoleum, Bruce told us that a psychic brought in by the tour company sensed a number of spirits and that, while it was unclear exactly what they were saying, they clearly wanted to be left alone. The group are where they do not belong – the guide's role as a leader of the group through an unfamiliar space is a testament to this. The Mausoleum 'let itself be inhabited in its inside, that is, haunted by a foreign guest' (Derrida 1994: 4), as do other haunted locations. Visitors begin to tread on the same boundaries of ambiguity as these 'resident' ghosts; they inhabit the temporal present yet find themselves in a spatial, historical past as told to them by their guide. They are visible to each other and are yet 'underground' or in exclusively accessible spaces that are invisible to the rest of the world. The spectral is not only brought out of these spaces on tours, but an invasive spectrality is brought into them

and acted out. As Bruce demonstrated with his storytelling, the boundaries between human and spirit become blurred.

Ghost tourism, through conjuring the spectral qualities of places and bodies, represent a special type of living history that uses the spectral to 'lure visitors and re-enchant, or in some cases, enchant, them with the past' (Clanton 2007: 11). Holloway (2010: 625) describes ghost tours as enchantment, which occurs when 'we are simultaneously excited and made to feel uneasy as the world we know, [and] the mundane... is suspended and affects us in unforeseen ways.' Edinburgh's ghost tourism 'engineers - through a relatively consistent performative infrastructure... affective charges of possibility and speculation' (ibid.: 618). The past is brought into the present for the purposes of entertainment and (to a lesser extent) education, taunting tour-goers with the ghostly. Ghost tourism however 'delights but does not delude' (Saler 2006: 702), and visitors are aware that what they are seeing is not an authentic retelling of history in the most idealised sense, but an enchanted history meant to entertain visitors with the spooky and subvert more everyday experiences.

Authentic experiences of enchanted history as seen in ghost tourism take a specific form. Handler and Saxton (1988: 245) highlight that authentic experiences refer to a life that is planned or authored, and encapsulates the 'magic' or 'special' moments during re-enactments when it feels as real as it possibly can. These remarkable moments are understood in contrast to the lesser experiences of ordinary life. Carl - a 22 year-old student from Mexico City who came with me to the Blair Street Vaults - described ghost stories in this way, as 'legends' specifically:

For me, legends are filled with fantastic things that somehow are true. That's the definition of a legend. So, all these legends... they are true somehow for me.

Carl understood the apparent impossibility of ghosts and yet, in ways he could not express, they remain at least partially true for him. Another visitor added to this by saying that a legend like a ghost ‘could be true but is not necessarily.’ This kind of impact, leaving visitors wondering about the truth behind legends, is achieved through theatrical techniques (Holloway 2010). The theatrical and immersive nature of most tours ‘encourages audience members to get lost... in the “real” (highly detailed, tactile etc.) fictional world’ (Biggin 2017: 197), an example of how haunting sucks people into a version of reality (Gordon 2008). The bringing forth of spectrality by the tour guides means that visitors are enchanted and left grappling with what just might be the case.

Handler and Saxton (1988) do not bring spectrality into their discussion of authentic experiences. Making this step, one could argue that the dichotomy between authentic and inauthentic experiences echoes the Durkheimian binary between the sacred, the ‘superior, powerful, forbidden to normal contact, and deserving of great respect’ understood with direct reference to the supernatural, and the profane, ‘the ordinary, uneventful, and practical routine of everyday life’ (Pals 2006: 96). The spectral can be seen as supernatural and sacred; it is that which is not only forbidden but foreclosed to typical modes of perception, requiring a specific rendering of place and bodies in order for it to become even partly intelligible. It is this process that characterises ghost tours, the attempt to ‘mould enchanted affectual registers in conjunction with different materialities that have the capacity to affect and act on tourists’ bodies through the multiple modulation of intensity and enchantment’ (Holloway 2010: 634). Through the planned medium of the tour, the experience has the plotted and theatrical ingredients it requires to magically bring the “long gone” back into the present day in a fantastical manner designed to entertain or spook. It is the enchantment of a ghostly past as realised through performance.

Conclusion:

To sum up, ghost tour guides take their audience through the spectral, present ghosts as ambiguous beings, and become ambiguous themselves. To do this, they use performative techniques to create immersive environments that trigger ‘high engagement, emotional investment, rapt attention, sensory stimulation, emotion, empathy or make-believe’ (Biggin 2017: 179). Furthermore, they make themselves and their group part of the spectral. They seem able to abandon the human and become ghosts themselves, occupying a liminal state and space as they immerse the group into haunted places. The performance of the guides is a way that tours become examples of enchantment, assuring their popularity through their ability to entertain and permit an escape from the mundanity of the everyday.

The ghostly is popular in Scottish tourism, but this does not simply stem from factual curiosity. Instead, ghosts present an opportunity for visitors to become part of something both new and old, both there and not there, and to lose themselves in the unique sensation of the spectral. Tour guides, through their skilful performances, are central in bringing visitors into these special places and in making the experience one worth having. The dead sell, but the living are the ones who profit in more ways than one.

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