

Ghost, Space and Everyday Life: a case study of “Neighborhood Ghost Stories”

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Introduction

There are raising interests in haunting culture and spaces. The spatial turn in haunting analysis could be groundbreaking in the face of the bulk of analysis having got theorized in terms of being more temporal. Temporal orientation is believed to provide limited help to the discussions, to name a few, the physical locale that haunted, phantom and blurred spatial boundaries, disturbing ghosts and urban order. These considerations in no doubt help revisit cultural geographies with a haunting culture vision. (Blanco and Peeren, 2010)

To make these multi-angle and interdisciplinary investigation, television and television programmes if overlooked will make little development to intervene in haunting and spaces in modern societies which being popularly is characteristic of mediatization. Precisely, television is deemed a technological and representational attribute to haunting geographies. In terms of technological attribute, television keeps broadcasting day and night to audiences in specific locales and audio-visual montage that audiences seems coming elsewhere, even nowhere. This directly manifests the ghostliness of this modern technology. Apart from technological dimension, the relation between television and haunting geography mainly rested on its representation which has constituted the image of spaces. Ruins, historical sites, metropolis etc. are often touched with spiritual mystery on TV screen, and whatever kinds of genre a programme takes, either drama or documentary, television is capable of channeling its representation into haunting geography itself.

Hong Kong is a city welcoming haunting culture in which television plays an important role as circulating enduring legends and myths time and again. These locally-televised and locally-based haunting stories inevitably involve the city in the primary terms of geography. What the stories tell explicitly and implicitly and the understanding of Hong Kong that it leads certainly deserve more substantial attention. It is convincing to understand Hong Kong which is the city of its own spatiality.

This essay is about *Neighborhood Ghost Stories*/ “區區有鬼故”(Television Broadcasts Limited, TVB) in 2014 and examine televised haunting geography in Hong Kong. In each episode, *Neighborhood Ghost Stories* covers several haunted locales that are distributed in one district. In the first section, an overview is given to the ghost stories and their locales in one district. The next part is a short play of a haunting story featuring one locale, and an interview with experts on haunting is provided to end up an episode. It is rather clear that geographic perception predominantly frames the narratives of ghost stories, not matter how they are divided into district (like “區區”) or located in locales, like neighborhood. Spatiality and haunting with their relations are well depicted in the show, especially the first two parts are the focus of the investigation.



(Source: <https://www.bilibili.com/video/av10874865/>)

Such an investigation of televised haunting geography concerns first of all the construction of haunting neighborhood which primarily prefigures the overlapped zone for ghost and neighborhood. Moreover, emphasis is put on textual analysis of the ghost stories in the programme so as to examine the relationship between ghost and space. These combined analyses are convincingly capable of completing the understanding of ghost and spatiality by approaching the cultural investigation on haunting neighborhoods.

Making of Neighborhood and Ghost

The title of “Making Neighborhood Ghost Stories” implicitly manifests two projects: it makes the ghost stories as neighboring stories; and it makes the neighborhood haunted. The former is primarily meant to transform ghost stories into one that encourages people to associate with neighborhood, characteristic of specific spatiality and everyday life. The latter is obviously to construct specific sites relevant to haunting which inevitably features death, the return of the death and so on. Nevertheless, it is difficult to divide the representations clearly into and limit them in any one of the projects, most of them possibly serve two projects at the same time. However, what is really important for this vision is to provide perspectives to examine the complicated paths to the whole construction.

What Ester Preen (2010) does review the relationship of ghost and everyday life is importantly inspiring the analysis of this local television programming by opening up the examination on the concept of neighborhood which is inevitably related to everyday life. She argues that ghost’s and everyday’s “function and significance should be historically and culturally specified.” This specificity relieves the analysis of ghost culture in Hong Kong from predetermined ideas, such as the dichotomist thought of ghost and the realm of life, so do ghost and neighborhood. The meaning and importance of these two

concepts, as well as their relationship call for a historically and culturally localized analysis.

In the first section of the programme, the neighborhood makes a realistic setting for ghost stories, which is particularly established via the interviews with neighbors and the narrative of the places where haunted sites are located.

The interview section in substance forges a haunted everyday life. Everyday life's realness is basically served by the depictions in the interviews. The interviewees, "neighbors(街坊)", who are actually living in these haunted neighborhoods. They are in real and these people are witnesses of haunting in these neighborhoods. Interestingly, almost none of them were really involved in or the witness of the ghost stories, they usually tell what they heard. It means that they are absent TV audience. However, owing to their status as being trustworthy, the ghost stories get seemingly verified as real in everyday life in these neighborhoods. Furthermore, the scene making of the interviews succeeds in merging the styles of everyday life and haunting. The neighbors all look ordinary and stand in some streets, often backgrounded by the haunted buildings, as if they are the neighbors chatting about the ghost stories happened in these neighborhood. This is a technique to make realistic every day setting, but the scenes are also designed to make aesthetically haunting, through making the scenes mysterious and a bit horrible. They are standing sideways to the camera, with half face hidden in the dark; their silhouettes, as well as the haunted buildings are lined or colored with green and blue light. These typical techniques of horror movies or dramas shadow faces to convey the danger of the unknown which is crucial to make a mysterious and horror programme. This section highlights the possibility of mixing everyday life and ghost, either by setting the ghost stories in the realness associated with everyday life, or by visually stylizing the scene of neighborhood as a spooky and mysterious one.

What's more, the programme makes effort to forge ghost stories into the realm of real life by means of historical explanation of ghost stories and attributing the happening of ghost stories to the local landscapes. The local histories of each district account for the haunting phenomenon through associating the ghost and the death in the past. To trace back the death in the past, it inevitably engages in constructing local histories. Most of narratives of local history consist of glimpses of historical moments when mass casualties happened. The historical moments in these districts when people were killed, for example, in the Japanese invasion, natural disasters, man-caused disasters or so on, always connect these sites with death. Southorn Playground is a great example of this historical account. It is reported in the programme that there is sometimes a shadow haunting around this playground, which is explained that the shadow is the ghost of the dead owner of this property, Southorn, who was killed by the Japanese invaders. However, as a matter of fact, the playground is actually named after a colonel Sir Thomas Southorn whose death actually has nothing to do with Japanese invasion. Untrue as this explanation, what really tells from the explanatory history narratives is the intention to fabricate connection between the haunting and the historic sense. Historicalness distributes certainty and realness, as the popularly perceived, while ghost stands for the obscurity, unintelligibility and uncertainty. Clearly, all ghostly matters, such as ghost

itself, more or less interrupt human life of order. It then requires people to tackle the interruptive heterogeneity in the ordered life, such as the confusing shadow in the Southern playground. This attempt is probably not as much obvious as a proclaimed intention, but as much unconscious as the explanatory construction of history the programme tries to make. Ghost stories adapted to the historical realness in local life through bridging ghost and local history.



(Source:

<https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E4%BF%AE%E9%A0%93%E7%90%83%E5%A0%B4>)

Given that there are many unknown in everyday life in the presence of realness, the lived spaces that are haunted cannot be maintained in a fixed realness. The realness is attached to spaces like neighborhood which is shown to be multilayered and rewritten on the levels of imagination, understanding and experience. Rewriting the realness can be realized in the historical explanations. For instance, the ghost story of Southern playground adds a kind of fabricated collective memory of war into a real perception of the space. This process of making realness is observed to illustrate the histories in the programme-photograph. There are always montages of old photographs of each district during the introduction of districts. The photographs that record the past geographical appearance address themselves as a paradox of realities. One reality is simply the contemporary lived spaces, and another reality is the past landscapes confirmatively reflecting in the pictures. The past reality must be somewhat strange because the spaces, the landscapes, the neighborhoods are impossible to see people who usually do in the lived spaces today. Therefore, the narration inclines to impose a strange realness on perceptions of spaces.

The real landscape of districts is characterized by haunting. It is explicitly manifested in the programme that some kinds of landscape help haunting stories prevail. These landscapes include historical site, plant, squatter housing, low cost housing and Tong Lau (唐樓), and specific spaces as stair, slope and narrow lane. The programme does not elaborate on these landscapes. However, it cannot be denied that these real landscapes are associated with the unknown, insecurity and danger. Some of these feelings may echo with a real experience in a shabby building or a gloomy place, while the others may result from the negative perception of “the otherness” for the lower class. If so, it is conceivable to deduce several particular landscapes, the part of our real life, and raise the spooky vibe. Obviously, ghost’s realm is proved to possibly deprive from spatial experiences or perceptions.

In this part, emphasis is put on the representational domain of making haunting neighborhoods, particularly stressing the construction of stylized neighborhood, narrative of local history and landscapes, which all intertwine perception, experience and representation around the theme of everyday life and ghosts. Clearly, making neighborhood stories shows the potential to live one kind of every life in which ghost haunts the neighborhood. Ghosts widely live in districts and share the places as the arena and product of everyday life. In every life, people attempt to frame confusing and mysterious ghosts into the order of every life, by the ways of historical fabrication and reasoning based on the spaces. And it is undoubtedly by these ways that the intersections of everyday life and ghost in neighborhood come into appearance.

Ghost and Spaces

Geography is a key to open up haunting stories by addressing spatiality to haunting or ghost. For example, spirits can be bound by their spatial destinations in life-world. Or it is necessary to have sites storing or mediating what once disappeared. Reappearance and space, and things can be viewed as everlasting even though its embodiment vanished, all of these can be empirically discussed in an analysis of *Neighborhood Ghost Stories* so as to examine the relationship between space and ghost culture.

One example is the short play of sixth episode, “Mad Spirit in High Street”, an adaptation of High Street haunting stories. Spreading haunting stories of the previous asylum in High Street is turned into a fiction with a revenge theme. It is a dead woman, Fung, who takes revenge against her husband, Kuen and his mistress who sent her to the leprosarium in High Street to grab her property.



(Source:

<https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E8%A5%BF%E7%87%9F%E7%9B%A4%E7%A4%BE%E5%8D%80%E7%B6%9C%E5%90%88%E5%A4%A7%E6%A8%93>)

Space possibly stands for physical constraint that is based and concentrates on the control of body. This can be perfectly illustrated by Fung's captivity. Captured in the leprosarium, Fung loses not only her freedom to get out of the place, but also the freedom to take any action. She has to suffer from gloominess, rude treatment, rape and most importantly, captivity. However, physical constraint can only be realized by physical existence. This means nothing but the possibility that Fung casts off the physical chains, she will be free. And the most absolute way to terminate the physical control is to destroy the pivot (body), in other words, to commit a suicide. Death, in the worldview of haunting story, is a gateway for the physical domain to the spiritual one. Only when Fung turns into a spirit and is not being physically restrained. Fung is no longer take up permanent residence in the leprosarium and be capable of traveling freely to take revenge.

It is widely known that spirits are meant to move without constraints, but it is clearly observed that ghosts often haunt at a specific locale as if they are bound for somewhere. The reason why ghosts haunt there can be a romance promise. For example, it is revealed in the first episode of "East Town Theatre". This story is about a couple, Dong and Yu Yin, who failed to have the appointment at the theatre. They met each other finally even though the girl had committed suicide because of her disappointment to the boy. Such a life-and-death love story can be interpreted as the underlying shift of the meaning of the rendezvous so as to better understand the space.



(Source: <https://hollycowplanet.wordpress.com/2016/07/06/13-14-%E4%B8%80%E7%94%9F%E4%B8%80%E4%B8%96/attachment/1314/>)

Seat number of thirteen and fourteen for the East Town theatre is significant shift of the spatial focus in this love story. At the beginning, the significance as symbol primarily initiated their engagement, they choose venue for rendezvous for the reason that it is a promise of life as “yat sang yat sai” (stands for 一生一世). It is in a highly symbolic moment that Yu Yin picks a place to meet Dong to clear things up in their relationship in spite of anywhere else. Most importantly, Yu Yin arrives at as scheduled but Dong doesn't, it sharply turns this site into an unachieved love. All she wants is to complete their love by meeting Dong again, the space is then transformed into an unachieved desire. She is disappointed by Dong's failure to attend appointment and chooses to stay at the appointed seats as a ghost haunting. Owing to her haunting, any audience taking these seats would be inevitably bewitched, the seats are therefore not available for sale, and other audience cannot get the seats except for Dong and Yu Yin's spirit. Clearly speaking, it is Yu Yin's spirit which manifests exclusive sovereignty by bewitching trespassers. As Yu Yin meets Dong at the ending, they can achieve the goal and end up with ascending to heaven, and the haunting disturbance on the seats vanishes. In other words, ambiguous spatial boundaries are dissolved with the withdrawal from the pursuit of love.

From the above analysis, space in the realm of life is often addressed to confine and limit. On the one hand, the spatial confine and limit embodied discipline and violence generated by equality while ghost signals liberty of space by accomplishing disembodiment. On the other hand, exclusive spatial confine and limit may be made intangibly by ghost out of their will and pursuit. To conclude, interactions between ghost and human beings result in the definition, empowerment and abolishment of the spatial confine and limit.

Conclusion

Neighborhood ghost stories show that ghost is a disturbing part of having progressively integrated everyday life and the processing integration in itself. To integrate ghost into everyday life is to frame the haunting unknown in everyday life. The unknown is based on experience and perception of real space, and might end up with integrating historical explanation that is bridged to ghost stories. Owing to this reconciliation of ghost stories and order of everyday life, the realness of space gets multiplied by historical explanation which is likely to overlay a strange realness in terms of spatial imagination. The spatial imagination and its effect are appropriately compared to ghost in view of their shared unfamiliarity and realness. Given the intersection of ghost and everyday life, there is no wonder that neighborhood has possibilities to be represented as spooky and mysterious haunted space.

Moreover, as a part of everyday life, ghost participates in spatial construction through spatial power configuration. The dynamic power relation was obviously displayed by spatial boundary and confine as its result. To the boundary and confine, immateriality is the key to understand ghost's role and significance. Not only can ghost stand for a breakthrough in the embodied boundary and confine, but also ghost manifests its sovereignty by setting up intangible exclusion. In consideration of the formation and operation of these confines and boundaries, immateriality makes an appearance of its significance in space construction.

Reference :

1. Blanco, María del Pilar. and Esther. Peeren. 2010. *Popular Ghosts: The Haunted Spaces of Everyday Culture*. Continuum.