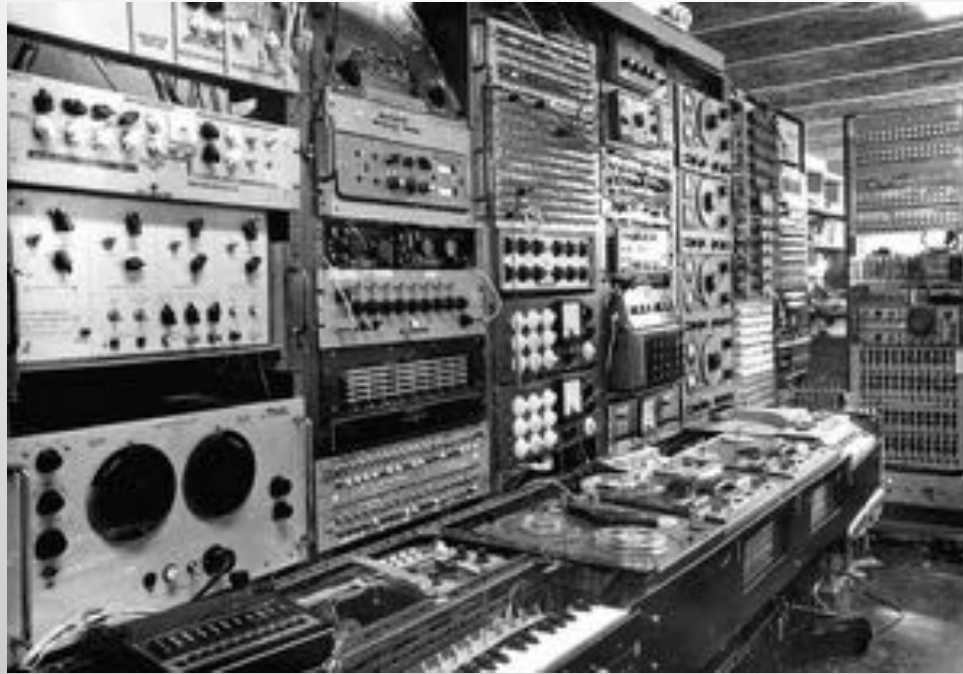


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HAUNTOLOGICAL NOSTALGIA

The lost futures of the BBC Radiophonic Workshop

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Topics

- ✓ Residual Media
- ✓ Popular Modernism
- ✓ Hauntological Nostalgia
 - ✓ Musical Legacy

Residual Media

Hauntology – the persistence of residual cultural forms in hyper-modern culture...

Residual media is old, but not obsolete or ‘dead media’.

‘Residual’ – the relationship between old and new media is **not based on technical superiority making the old obsolete**; residual media are still very much living, changing, and evolving. For example, the Internet has increased interest in old media technologies...

For Acland, residual media “reveals that, ultimately, new cultural phenomena rely on encounters with the old”. (2007: cover).





Dick Mills, in the documentary *BBC Radiophonic Workshop: pioneers of sound* (2014)

Residual Media

The **BBC Radiophonic Workshop** – closed in 1998, but whose idiosyncratic sonic signifiers *residually* persist across contemporary music and media culture...

Sound unit of the BBC, formed in 1958 to provide sound effects, atmospheres and incidental music.

Known for its experimental and pioneering work in electronic music and music technology, especially through the use of **found sound**.

1950 and 1960s – popular scores for the science fiction television series *Doctor Who* and *Quatermass and the Pit*. 1985 – 300 BBC programmes per year.

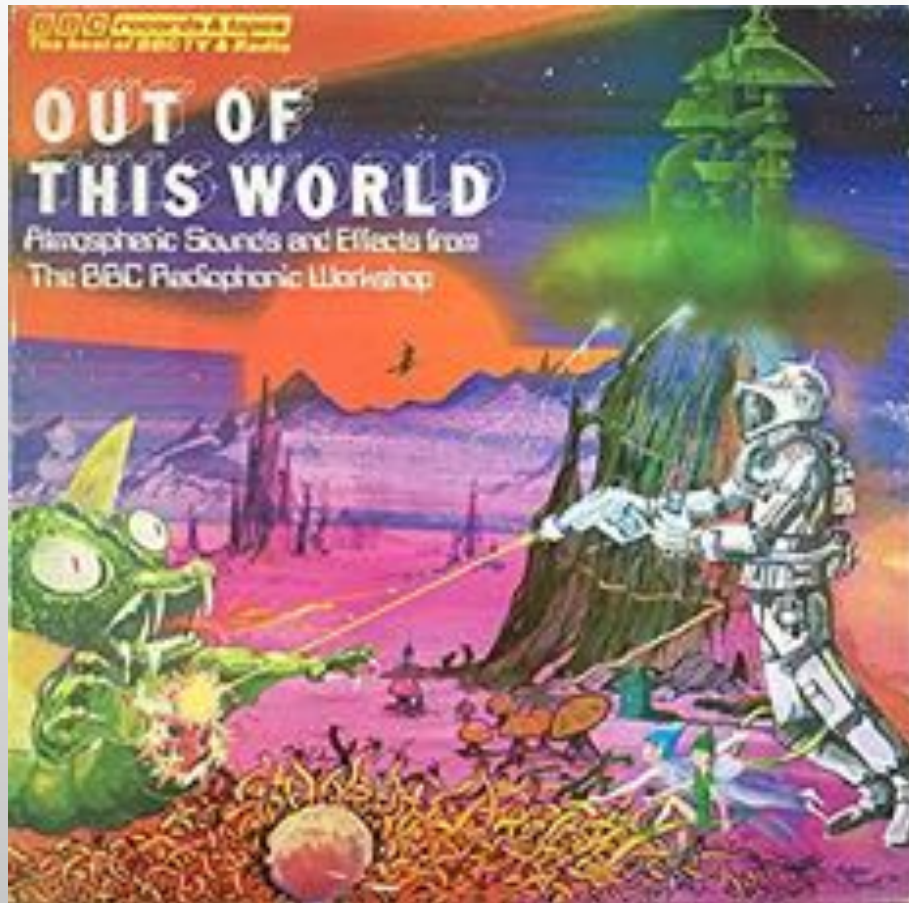
Simon Reynolds; “the shuddery impact of those unearthly timbres left a scar, like being molested by aliens.” (2011: 341)

1990s – BBC Director General John Birt introduces market-based reforms (departments to bid against each other for services; closing those that couldn't make enough money to cover their costs, etc.).

The workshop was closed in 1998.



Popular Modernism



Out of the World (1976)

BBC Radiophonic Workshop sound effects album, featuring Dick Mills, Delia Derbyshire and Roger Limb.



Popular Modernism

The political context of the workshop as an **experimental, state-funded organisation** is key to its enduring cultural legacy:

- the experimental practices of the workshop strongly contributed to its production of weird electronic sounds (especially on BBC children's television between 1955–75);
- its music was relatively hard to find until the 1990s, just as the workshop was being decommissioned;
- distinct period of British **popular modernism** also associated with postpunk music, brutalist architecture, and Penguin paperbacks (J.G. Ballard – 'Memories of the Future', etc.).



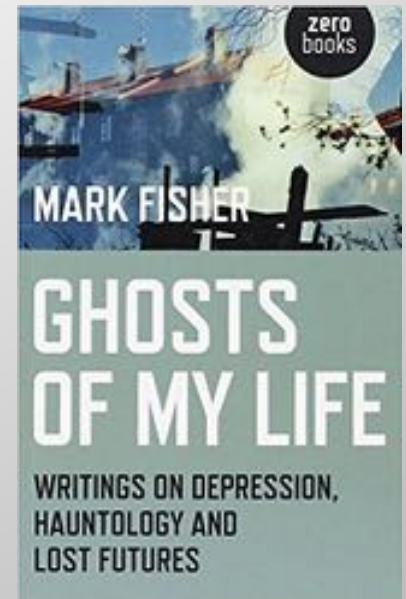
Hauntological Nostalgia

In *Ghosts of My Life* (2014), Mark Fisher argues that this period of British popular modernism was **both progressive and popular** – social and financial state support was not seen as the enemy of cutting-edge creativity and innovation.

The workshop's 'alien' music signifies **a utopian future that has been irrevocably lost** – a future contextualised in Britain by the post-war consensus and its attendant narratives of benevolent public service broadcasting, state planning and social engineering.

Fisher and others have drawn attention to the shift into late-capitalist economies (late-1970s), which he argued has “gradually and systematically deprived artists of the resources **necessary to produce the new**”.

The sense of a 'lost future' allows Fisher to link the workshop's music to a wider cultural experience he calls '**hauntology**'.



Musical Legacy

The continued fascination of the workshop's theme tunes, jingles and 'special sound' for television and radio can be seen as an attempt to recuperate a sense of **national technocratic identity** linked to the post-war modernisation of Britain.

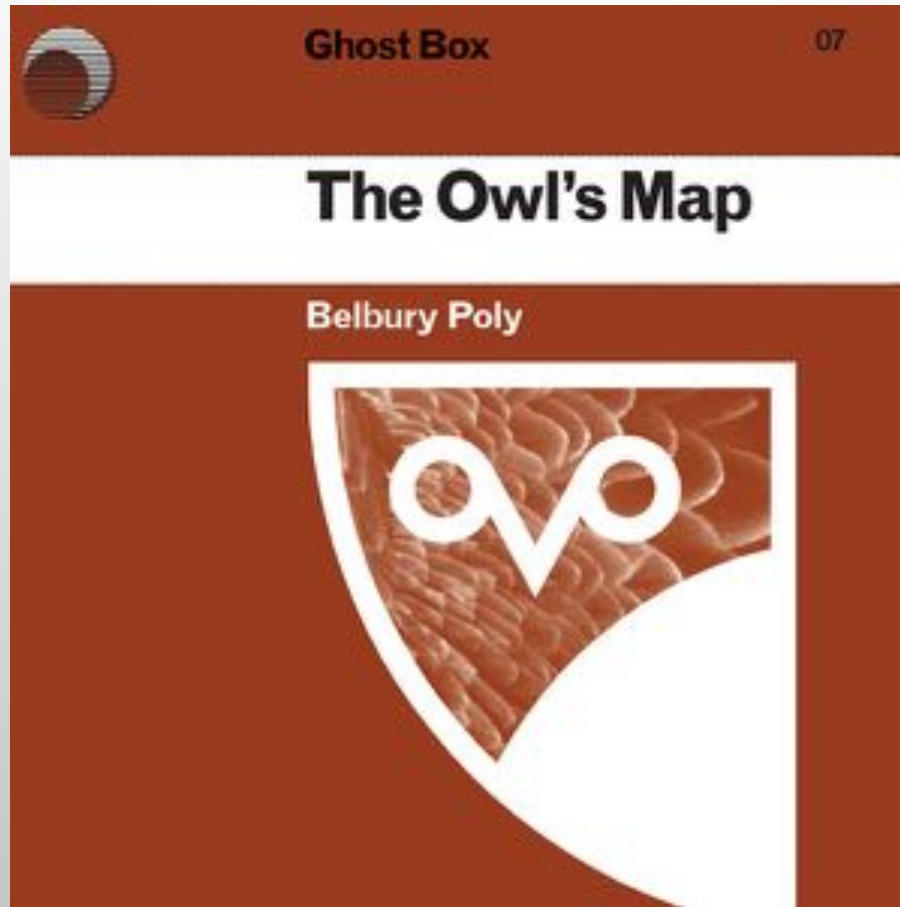
Hauntological music draws heavily on sounds and cultural reference points encountered through soundtracks and media related to the workshop – also a period in which BBC broadcasting dominated the British media.

Ghost Box record label – established in 2004 by Julian House and Jim Jupp “create a parallel reality built upon memories of a **very British past**” (Mark Pilkington, *Boing Boing* blog).



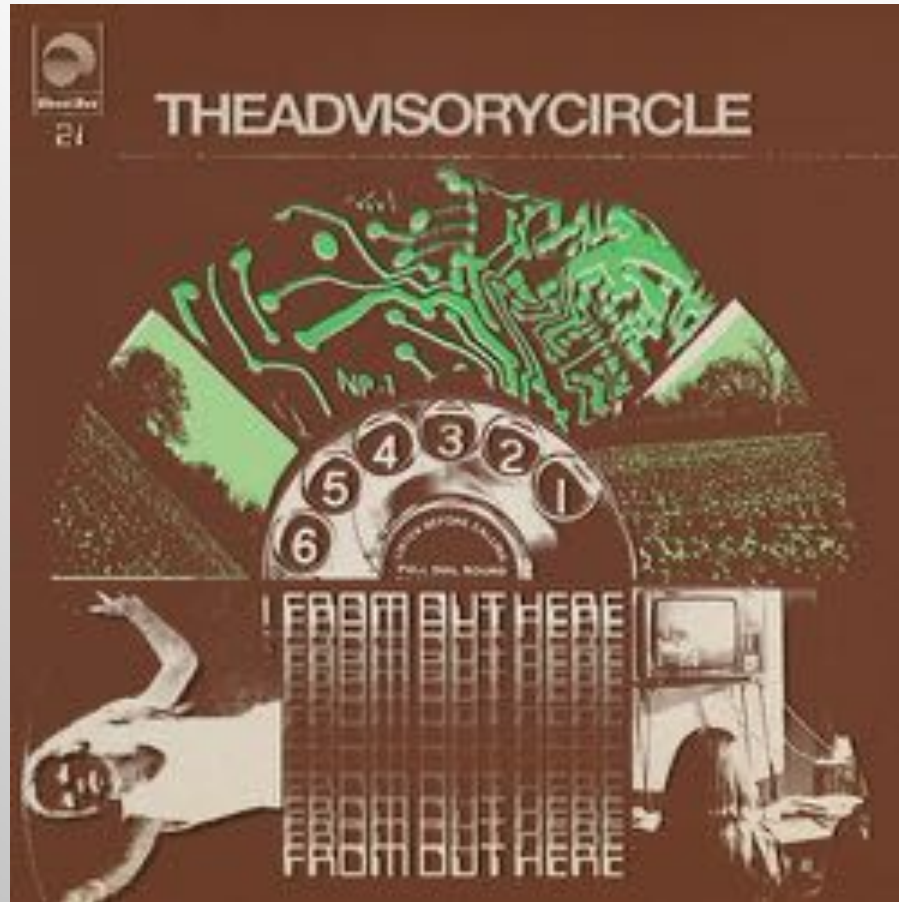
Ghost Box

Ghost Box



'The New Mobility', by Belbury Poly (2006) from *The Owl's Map*

Ghost Box



'Winter Hours', by The Advisory Circle (2015) from *From Out Here*

Ghost Box



'Lost Ways', by Pye Corner Audio (2016) from *Stasis*

Summary

- ✓ Contemporary digital culture produces **residual** effects – a fetishisation of the old or obsolete, whether media (analogue) or entire periods...
- ✓ The period of the BBC Radiophonic Workshop's existence (1955-98) broadly encompasses a distinct period of British **popular modernism**;
- ✓ Fisher's work shows that the unstable socio-economic conditions of late-capitalism have so distorted our sense of the future that the new is becoming impossible to imagine – only past visions of the future, such as those provided by the workshop, offer a kind of **hauntological** comfort;
- ✓ Contemporary media research (such as in popular music) must increasingly accommodate the destabilisation of the categories of the old and new in both technological and semiotic contexts.