Documentary Ghosts

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> But I almost think we are all of us ghosts. … It is not only what we have inherited from our father and mother that "walks" in us. It is all sorts of dead ideas, and lifeless old beliefs, and so forth. They have no vitality, but they cling to us all the same, and we cannot shake them off. Whenever I take up a newspaper, I seem to see ghosts gliding between the lines. There must be ghosts all the country over, as thick as the sands of the sea. And then we are, one and all, so pitifully afraid of the light.
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> —Mrs. Alving in Act II of *Ghosts*, by Henrik Ibsen (1881)

Introduction

When it comes to understanding prehistoric humans, some of the most important discoveries have been made at Qafzeh Cave in Israel, where our ancestors lived some 100,000 years ago. Among these findings are lumps of ochre, a reddish mixture of clay and iron oxide. Unassuming though it may seem, the ochre at Qafzeh is far more than just rusty clay. It is among the earliest evidence we have for symbolic thought in humans (Hovers et al., 2003). The ochre was arranged at burial sites and smeared over human bones. We don't know exactly what the ochre symbolized, but we know it had to do with death and ritual, and that its symbolism was passed down through the generations. So in this reddish pigment, we can see the origins of all abstract reasoning, the basis of language and math, of creativity and imagination—of evidence itself.

Documents can be defined as objects that provide evidence. In this paper, I am interested in exploring how they do so, particularly in anomalous cases— where the evidence is specious. I suggest that it is fruitful to consider such cases with the metaphor of ghosts, as ghosts suggest a breakdown in our everyday understandings of the link between life and death. I describe three types of ghosts and consequently three types of documentary ghosts, finding examples of each in the domain of public art.

Evidentiary Links

A document is evidence of something (Briet, 1951/2006). That is, there is the document on one hand, and the thing being evidenced on the other. For example, a library catalog entry provides evidence that a given book exists within the library's collection. For brevity, let's call "the thing being evidenced" the *object* of

the document. A document, then, implies a link between some form of evidence and its object, what can be called an evidentiary link.

The term *evidence* here may be questioned. Our everyday understandings of evidence may be too simplistic to capture all the ways documents can link with objects. To this end, Day (2016) discusses how documents may provide "evidence" of absence; under certain conditions, an empty chair may be construed as a person's portrait. For this reason, he prefers the concept of indexicality rather than evidence. His critique of the term evidence, however, seems to spring from its connotations in logical positivism; for my part, I favor an interpretation of the term *evidence* not restricted to logical positivism. (Perhaps Day has come to do the same, as his 2019 book *Documentarity* puts evidence front and center.)

Whatever we call them, I am interested in the nature of evidentiary links. What is their nature? Are there different types? One famous typology for understanding these links comes from Peirce, who distinguished three modes of signification: symbols (where the link is arbitrary and learned), icons (where the link arises from resemblance), and indexes (where the link relies on inference) (Chandler, 2007). Another typology comes from Day (2019), who distinguishes two philosophies of evidence (documentarity), strong and weak: Strong documentarity relies on *a priori* categories of ideal reference, where signs provide evidence for classes of universal essences; while weak documentarity is *a posteriori* and empirical, where signs provide evidence through the self-expression of particular individuals.

In this paper, I want to consider some anomalies of evidence, where the evidentiary link seems to break down. What might such cases be able to teach us about the nature of evidence?

"A Spiritual Character"

There is something a bit boggling about the very fact that evidence can exist—that one thing can stand in for something else. Perhaps the possibility is more straightforward with icons, in which the sign resembles the object in some appreciable way; but at least with symbols and indexes, it seems to me a miracle of human cognition that humans can look at one thing and see another. To be sure, this capacity is probably not strictly unique to humans, as other animals exhibit such abilities to a lesser degree (Hofstadter & Sander, 2013).

This mysteriousness, it seems, is why Dutch documentalist Donker Duyvis said documents have "a spiritual character" (Voorhoeve, 1964, p. 48), making reference to a nonmaterial realm accessible through pure thought (Buckland,

1997, p. 806). Somewhat similarly, Levy writes that documents constitute an "act of ventriloquism, of throwing the voice into an inanimate object" (Levy, 2016, p. 23), a way of putting part of a human soul into an object.

In this paper, I will take these ideas further by considering documents directly through the metaphor of ghosts. As Nord (2019) writes, metaphors can be useful analytical tools. Indeed, some argue that human cognition itself works through metaphor (Hofstadter & Sander, 2013; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

Documentary Ghosts

A ghost is, in the simplest terms, an apparition of a dead person. Ghosts represent the widespread human belief that beings can exist without bodily form, on a supernatural plane. Evidence for ghosts, however, manifests on the natural or material plane. As such, ghosts constitute a kind of breakdown in our everyday understanding of the link between life and death, and likewise they can shed some light on breakdowns in documentary evidence.

Based on various stories of ghosts in popular culture, we can devise a typology of three kinds of ghosts. Most typically, a ghost is a spiritual form of someone in particular who has died and now appears to those who are still living. This may be a family member or a previous inhabitant of a house, for example. Let us call this type Ghost 1. Next, there are ghosts of people who are still living, sometimes called doppelgängers. A doppelgänger seems to be the ghost of somebody in particular; but because that somebody is still alive, it is not really their ghost, but a lookalike. This is Ghost 2. Finally, there are ghosts of nobody. These may be ghosts of particular characters who never existed, such as the Ghost of Christmas Past in Dickens' *A Christmas Carol;* or they may be "general" ghosts, such as the White Lady of various legends. This type we can call Ghost 3.

If ghosts manifest as material evidence, then perhaps we can think of ghosts as kinds of documents. With the three types of ghosts articulated above, we can posit three types of documentary ghosts:

Ghost Type	Object	Documentary Ghost Definition
Ghost 1	Dead	A document whose object no longer exists
Ghost 2	Still living	A document that seems to evince one object, but upon scrutiny it evinces something else
Ghost 3	Nonexistent	A document that seems to evince an object, but this object doesn't exist

Documentary Ghosts of Public Art

To illustrate this typology of documentary ghosts, I provide examples of each from the domain of public art in Philadelphia. A major American city of 1.6 million inhabitants, Philadelphia is a treasure trove of public art. One of its nicknames is "City of Murals"—there are some 4,000 murals around the city—and it is home to the Association for Public Art. Indeed, Philadelphia has been a major site for public art since before the American Revolution (Bach, 1992).

Ghost 1: Whose Object No Longer Exists

Robert Wyland is an artist and conservationist best known for his series of one hundred *Whaling Walls* (1981–2008), enormous outdoor murals of whales and other marine life that can be seen in many cities in the United States—with a few in other countries. *East Coast Humpbacks* (1993) was the Whaling Wall in Philadelphia, where it faced the Schuylkill River. It was demolished in 2017 and replaced by the new Aramark headquarters.

Aramark headquarters, completed in 2018

I first saw, and fell in love with, the mural in 2014, when I moved to the city. I had a deep connection to this mural, as it harkened back to my love for another Wyland Whaling Wall, Milwaukee's *Whale Commuters* (destroyed in 2008), which was the most memorable and exciting work of art that I experienced as a child. I always looked forward to seeing it at the entrance to a freeway tunnel as I rode in the car, commuting with my parents.

Though it has been destroyed, the Philadelphia Whaling Wall "lives on" in any number of digital documents. There are photographs, of course, but it is also a PokéStop in the augmented-reality smartphone game *Pokémon Go*. The mural has been replaced with the trendy glass windows of a corporate office; but as a Pokémon trainer, I can continue to visit this piece of public art—or rather, its ghost.
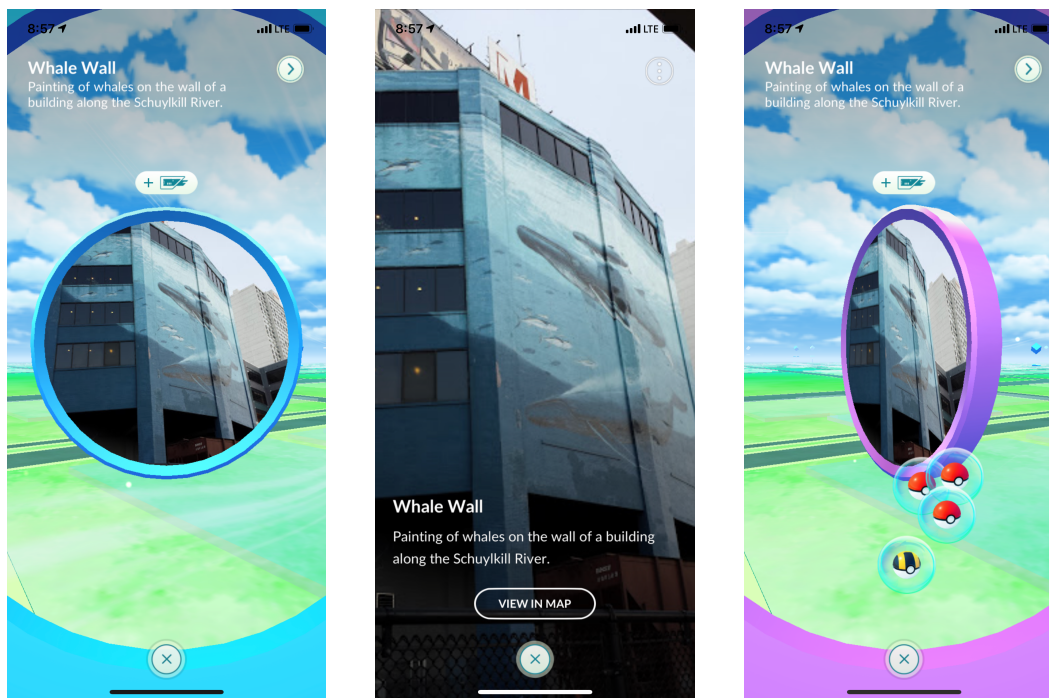
The "Whale Wall" PokéStop in Pokémon Go, where *East Coast Humpbacks* lives on, sort of.

Ghost 2: Whose Object Still Lives

The *LOVE* sculpture (1976), by a different Robert (Indiana), is perhaps Philadelphia's most famous work of public art. It sits in John F. Kennedy Plaza, but the plaza is better known as Love Park, a testament to the power of the work. Four letters, one tilted, in red, green and blue.

At least that's how it looks in the photographs. But when you visit the piece in person, you may notice that the fourth color is not actually blue, but purple. When it was originally created and installed, the sculpture included purple rather than blue—the only one of the several *LOVE* sculptures to feature purple.

But when the piece was restored in 1988, the should-be-purple sides were painted blue—

Couple taking a selfie with *LOVE* in July 2018, after its restoration

possibly because, by then, the purple had faded slightly (Voon, 2018). The blue was reaffirmed in the sculpture's 2008 restoration, but the error was discovered during its 2018 restoration, and it was corrected at that time.

Still, the blue sides can be seen today in innumerable photographs, including those sold by vendors and in tourist shops around the city and the stock photographs used to accompany online articles. Implicitly, these images purport to show the object as it is today, by virtue of being sold as souvenirs and adorning articles written after 2018, and yet they do so incorrectly. It takes a keen eye and some outside knowledge to see that these are doppelgängers.

Ghost 3: Whose Object Never Existed

For the past few years, I have been working on a series of photographs I call *Repetitions*. The photos show the address placards of Philadelphia facades containing only the numbers 2 and 4. But whereas the real Philadelphia addresses are only four digits, in *Repetitions* they seem to extend infinitely—2222222224222222222, 42424242424, 44444442222222, and so on—either until the numbers disappear behind some object or they run out of space.

I have posted these images on my personal Instagram account without any explanation or context. The comments I have received, both on and off Instagram, suggest that many people take these to be simple photographs of real facades, rather than photomanipulations. Photographs though they are, such addresses do not really exist. Insomuch as these are documents, and insomuch as they appear to document particular addresses, these are documentary ghosts.

Three examples from my *Repetitions* series

Discussion

When a person is confronted with a ghost, they seem to have three main choices:

1. take it at face value
2. disregard it entirely
3. explain it away

When faced with documentary ghosts, perhaps we have the same set of choices. (Though, to call them "choices" is somewhat misleading—a person may not realize the ghost is a ghost, and even if they do they may not experience any choice in the matter!) For the first choice, we can accept the evidentiary link as if there is no problem; for the second, we can set the document aside and move on to something else rather than figure out what may be going on here; and for the third, we can probe the document through a non-Otletian epistemology—perhaps one of semiotic indexicality or self-expression (see Day, 2016, 2019)—in order to devise a better understanding of the sort of evidence that is occurring in this case.

When we encounter any document, our natural stance towards it seems to be one of naive realism: We believe a document provides evidence of whatever it represents in a straightforward way. This truth is captured in the theorization of Otlet (1903/1990), who saw documents as containers for facts. But as the notion of documentary ghosts suggests, we can sometimes err in this regard: We may be faced with a ghost and not know it. Moreover, I would suggest that when we encounter a documentary ghost and see it as a ghost, our most typical response is the first one: to take it at face value. I want to comment briefly on the consequences of doing so with respect to each type of documentary ghost.

Documentary ghosts of the Ghost 1 type may be the most common. Oftentimes we document things precisely because they will not exist forever, such as events and perishable objects, and we take documents to be containers or surrogates for that thing. A newspaper article may serve as a document of a political mishap, as might a wedding photo, even though the mishap and wedding are long past. Ghost 1 documents are very valuable in this regard, but they entail possibilities for distortion; not everything can be documented, and interpreting documentary evidence requires inference. Even when we realize that we are dealing with a ghost, we may not notice some of our leaps of reasoning.

Ghost 2 may be the least common type of documentary ghost, and perhaps also the least troubling. This is because seeing a Ghost 2 document as a ghost requires some scrutiny, and that very scrutiny would seem inherently to provoke a different epistemological relationship to the document.

Finally, Ghost 3 is the realm of art as well as forgery. They may be difficult to detect in the first place; and they touch us so deeply that detecting them may not be enough. The example I gave was photography, and photography seems to be a paragon for this type of ghost. As Barthes (1977) pointed out, there is something about the photographic medium that conduces us to believe that photographs show objective realities. It is common knowledge that photographs are often (perhaps usually) touched-up or even heavily altered. We know this, and yet it seems that we cannot help but have a visceral response to such photography *as if it were real*, and that response leaves an imprint even once we've had time to critically dissect the photograph.

Conclusion

Upon reflection, it seems that documentary ghosts are all around us. In the excerpt from Ibsen's play *Ghosts* that opened this paper, Mrs. Alving suggests just this. The concept of documentary ghosts, and the typology developed here, help us to understand breakdowns in the evidentiary link between documents and their objects. As we can see, the object of a document need not actually exist. This gives us additional conceptual tools to understand the self-expressive powers of documents, as recently proposed by Day (2019). This framework, and the notion of documentary self-expression, provokes deeper consideration of the place and function of documents in contemporary society.

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