



CÜLT URE
essay

visu^al



Synopsis.

The exploration of the Ghost story as a literary theme, and how this relates to the historical sites in Herefordshire: Does the affiliation with such narratives enrich the cultural identity of a location? Or is it merely a marketing asset? And how has the presence of such iterations of this literary tradition, impacted the recorded histories of the county? Pure fiction, or necessary embellishment?

The article will seek to explore the notion of this literary practice, through the lens of a social-commentary: According to the architects of the genre, the ghost story has always adapted, in order to express the anxieties of the era.



A fear of today.

In the beginning, the fear had taken the form of the predators that had stalked early man, and the darkness that had cloaked much of the world they had inhabited.

These early inhabitants of the world wrestled with the dangers presented to them in the physical world, however, it would be the fear within that would pose the greater threat to them. With the introduction of an industrialised-society, a formative change had taken place and the fears of the old world gave way to the deep-rooted fears of the mind. This new mechanical-world, with its creeping limbs made of iron and steel, instilled an insatiable lust for wealth and power in the minds of men. And they embarked upon the task of conquering the unknown, resulting in the proliferation of expansionism and the building of empires.

This new world would inform the narrative that was being explored by the authors and journalists during this period. By adopting this literary practice many of the most noted authors in the British catalogue had begun to publish their observations on the macabre nature of the world in which they lived, translating their observations into novels and short-stories, that illustrated the true horror of a violent society built on inequality and a rigid class system. With writers such as Charles Dickens and Mary Shelly endeavouring to elevate the plight of the forgotten members of society. Through the use of the allegorical-narrative they pioneered a form of a social-commentary that may be compared to that adopted by the Micro-kingdom; Using the vocabulary of the inner-world to highlight the events and failings that are present, in the external-world.

In his 1927 film *Metropolis*, the German-Expressionist filmmaker Fritz Lang further explored the themes of industrialisation and the consequences of living in a society whose fortunes are built on servitude and inequality. Throughout the film, the viewer is confronted by the temptations of a seemingly utopian society; Where the want of man has been conquered by his innovative, mechanical creations.

Thematically, this film has a great deal in common with the literary-practices that are on display in the nineteenth century newspaper-serials and could for example be aligned with Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*: Each work possessing a shared focus on the use of allegory and metaphor, in the conveyance of a social-commentary. Like the Dickensian narrative *Metropolis* centres largely on the contemplation of civic-responsibility, as perceived

through the lens of morality. And confronts the audience with an uncomfortable truth in the form of a morality-play set against the backdrop of an industrialised utopian society.

In *Metropolis*'s cautionary tale, we find ourselves looking inward and having to question not only the individual, but also the collective. Within the narrative, looking to the make complex philosophical debate palatable for a largely uneducated audience, at that time.

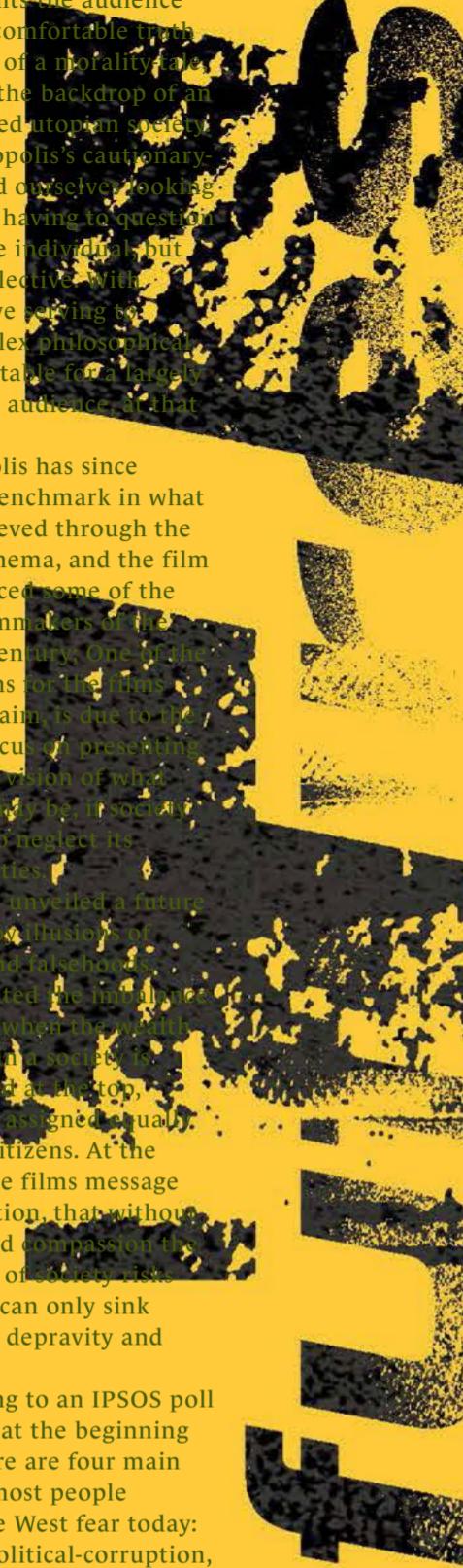
Metropolis has since become a benchmark in what can be achieved through the magic of cinema, and the film has influenced some of the greatest filmmakers in the twentieth century. One of the cited reasons for the film's critical acclaim is due to the directors focus on presenting a prophetic vision of what the future may be, if society continues to neglect its responsibilities.

The film unveiled a future populated by illusions of grandeur and falsehoods that illustrated the inequality that occurs when the wealth and power and success is concentrated at the top, rather than assigned equally among its citizens. At the centre of the film's message is the assertion, that without humility and compassion the governance of a society will fail and can only sink deeper into depravity and neglect.

According to an IPSOS poll carried-out at the beginning of 2019 there are four main areas that most people living in the West fear today: Financial/political-corruption, poverty/social-inequality, unemployment, and crime/violence. This data tells us of the existence of an intense distrust between the citizens of contemporary societies and their governing officials; With the feeling of unease evident in the presence of a collective paranoia.

In many of the contemporary iterations of the ghost story, civic distrust and paranoia are at the centre of the narrative and with the proliferation of technological-advancements such as; The Computer; The Smart-phone; Social Media; Among many others. The concept of the ghost-story has become far more abstract, and now serves a much broader international audience.

This audience is not preoccupied by a fear of a fictitious monster or a ghoul apparition, rather the prospect of economic-ruin or the possibility of becoming the victim of a crime. An anxiety that is exacerbated by the divisive rhetoric, that is advocated by our political parties and governing officials.



With the need to be recognised and valued by society at the centre of our fears, it is the fear of a perceived threat that serves to inform the scary tales of today. With narratives that are built on a tenuous framework of falsehoods and gaslighting by the politicians. And further exacerbated by a convoluted landscape, that is constructed from misinformation and the self-interest of its authors; Political opportunism has perhaps replaced the monster, hidden under the metaphorical bed.

It is during the sixteenth Century that we begin to see the emergence of a new form

of ghost-story, and with it the notion of the narrative being the product of the imagined world. With the unseen world; The one that exists within the mind, forming the basis of this new form of narration. The structure of which would realign the practice of telling scary-stories and give rise to a genre known as the thriller. This genre has gone on to feature heavily in both the literary-world, and in the films of many of today's most noted film-makers. One of the central themes of this new narration was the introduction of isolation, as an environmental condition. In response to which the protagonist would have to labour under, in order to liberate themselves: With

the psychological-state of the characters being conveyed through the use of metaphorical imagery.

During the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century this was further developed to establish a new, more sophisticated form of language, that explored the fears of the period and introduced the use of tension and pacing. Serving to establish the workings of the internal world, and allowing the author to explore a new form of social-commentary. With this practice being further explored in the twentieth century, with the emergence of such works as: *In Cold Blood*; *Psycho*; *Rear*

Window; And *Misery*. These explorations of the human-condition not only explored the existing narrative that was present in the in the day-to-day lives of the citizen, but also accommodated a meditative approach to the writing of such works, which themselves serve as holistic forms of ethnographic research; There are a great many novels and diaries in the British Library that serve as both a ghost-story and as a document of historical value that provides insight and data, about the time in which it had been written.



In *Cold Blood*, by the American writer Truman Capote was such a work, and had been widely condemned for its portrayal of the two individuals responsible for the 1959 murders of four members of the Herbert Clutter family; Depicting the two inmates, as they awaited execution on death-row, as being capable of humility and compassion, in contrast to their heinous crimes.

This work is a good example, of how a tale of the macabre can serve as a catalyst for a dialogue on an important issue, within the public forum. It is the role of such works to endeavour to question the actions of a society and to aid in the reflection on the choices that we make, certainly when those choices affect our fellow citizens. The plight of the persecuted and well-being of the collective has always served to illustrate the philosophical argument of good vs evil, and for the most part has been largely informed by the church. Certainly, this would be the case in the works published in the western world. With the introduction of intent and the accomplishing of a goal, first introduced to the practice of telling scary-stories being traced back to its inception in the sixteenth century, it can be argued that this particular form of narration has always existed to serve the needs of society and its agenda. For example: In the Cornwall during the Sixteenth-century, smugglers would spread stories of phantoms roaming the shores at night in an effort to keep the locals away from their illegal activities. And therefore be able to evade the law-enforcement officials, within the vicinity.

The history of the ghost-story could be viewed as a collection of observations informed by half-truths and self-serving lies. Some of these observations possess value, in the form of historical-data and social-commentaries that can be analysed and used to inform future choices. However, the very same publications have provided a platform for the less productive commentaries, such as: *A fear of the other* or *a fear of disability*.

"It would seem to me, that you people in the twenty-first century are rather distrusting of your governing officials, I do empathise with you, our Queen does nothing but sulk and has taken to wearing black most of the time"

—The Lady in Grey.

view

In many countries around the world the fear of disability persists; Often resulting in hardship, for those whom are stigmatised and persecuted due to having an illness or physical deformity. The fear of the other has become a key talking-point in the public-forum and is often utilised by the politicians to further advance their agenda; Their rhetoric veiled in dated notions of patriotism and anecdotal recollections of a perceived golden-age, now lost.

We have seen this to be the case in the recent BREXIT referendum, in which social-discourse and divisive rhetoric were at the centre of the political-debate. With the advocation of xenophobic language, this divisive messaging continues to embed itself in British society and can often be observed, in day-to-day life. Primarily manifesting in ill-considered, generalised statements made impulsively in response to a misrepresented narrative. Such statements are a key thread, in todays horror-story.

As the audience, it is important for us to reflect on the impact that our fears have on those around us, and in attempting to lessen this fear, we should seek out truth. Such endeavours are still accommodated in literature today, and it is in escape that we are able to think objectively and compassionately about the key issues; Using the refuge of the inner-world to decipher the abstract concepts, that are part of life in the twenty-first century.

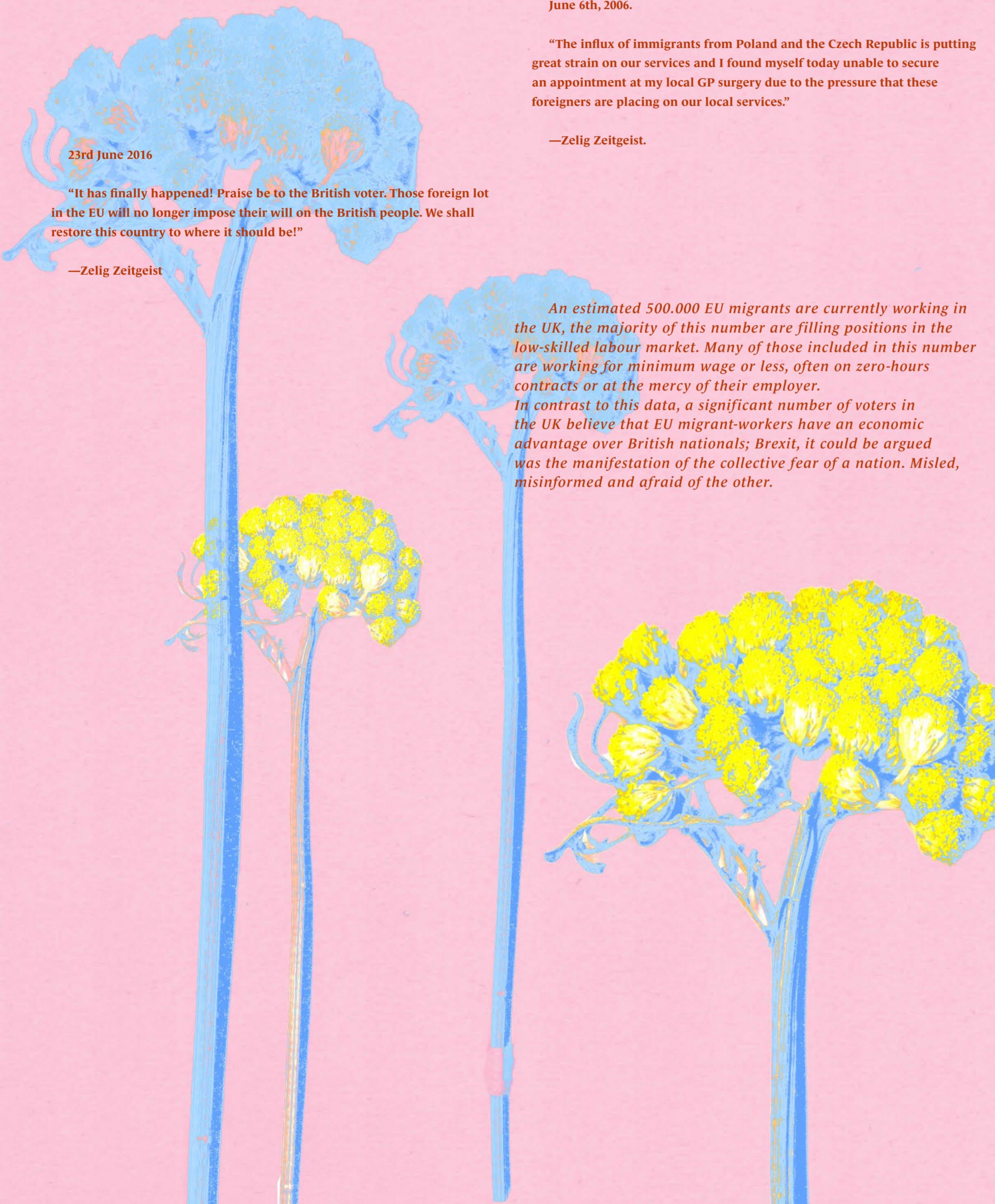
Today, fear is no longer rooted in such notions as the existence of an unseen entity or a ghoulish

fears for both men and women of the twenty-first century are embedded in our collective fear, as citizens of an increasingly unbalanced global community. reliant on so many external factors, that you have little or no control over, why would anybody have a fear of the dark?

The ghost story with its preference for the macabre, dares to venture into the dark with us, exploring the internal world, holding our hand as we journey together, hoping that when confronted with the shadows of the world, we will have the courage to stay true to the humanity that resides, within all of us.

world

Zelig Zeitgeist is a middle-aged man, mild mannered, and right leaning. He values routine and above all else he is a patriot. His love of his country is unrivalled, at least in his mind. And lately Zelig has struggled to recognise HIS country. He blames that foreign lot. He has kindly outlined his thoughts in his diaries, in the hope that future generations will learn from his astute observations.



June 6th, 2006.

"The influx of immigrants from Poland and the Czech Republic is putting great strain on our services and I found myself today unable to secure an appointment at my local GP surgery due to the pressure that these foreigners are placing on our local services."

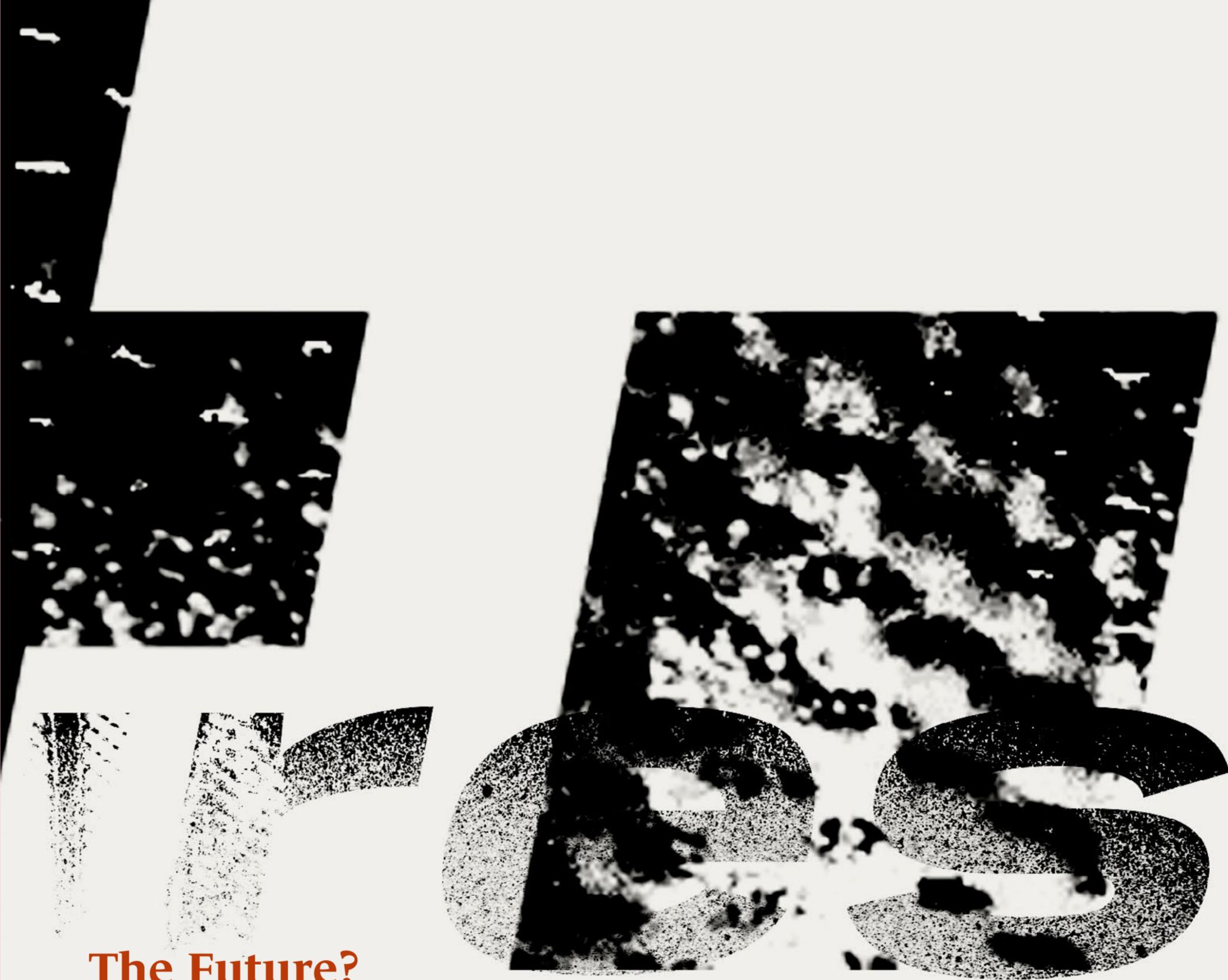
—Zelig Zeitgeist.

23rd June 2016

"It has finally happened! Praise be to the British voter. Those foreign lot in the EU will no longer impose their will on the British people. We shall restore this country to where it should be!"

—Zelig Zeitgeist

An estimated 500,000 EU migrants are currently working in the UK, the majority of this number are filling positions in the low-skilled labour market. Many of those included in this number are working for minimum wage or less, often on zero-hours contracts or at the mercy of their employer. In contrast to this data, a significant number of voters in the UK believe that EU migrant-workers have an economic advantage over British nationals; Brexit, it could be argued was the manifestation of the collective fear of a nation. Misled, misinformed and afraid of the other.



The Future?

We are no longer running from the strange noises that lurk in the darkness, we are running from the rational debate and a fact-based reality. And it is this absence of reality that is at the root of many of today's fears.

The MeToo movement has done a great deal to illustrate the fears of women in the twenty-first century, and through its wide reach the organisation has impacted the lives of many women, all around the world. The plight of many of the women in this movement is not illustrated by images of damsels in distress, being pursued by a disfigured villain, instead it is depicted by the inequality that exists for women, in many aspects of their day-to-day lives. With the emergence of such organisations there is now a new form of story-telling taking root; One that is grounded in the authenticity of first-hand-experience.

The Vlog is perhaps, to be considered a post-modern interpretation of a ghost-story, one that unfolds in real time and is performed not by characters, but by real people, conveying very real experiences. Many of which are just as chilling and uncomfortable to hear as any tale in the British library.

This new digital platform has elevated the conversations that are taking place in the public forum, today. And resulted in a more direct dialogue, around the subjects that drive the fears of the public, these include: Mental-health; Financial inequality; Xenophobia; National identity; Social-standing; Financial status; Vanity; Academic and professional achievement; And Ethnicity.

The function of contemporary formats in confronting gender-inequality or xenophobia, is comparable to the role that had been played by such novels as Oliver Twist or The Catcher in the Rye, in the confronting of the failings of society. And though these works were not ghost-stories, they did align themselves thematically with the ghost-story, in choosing to examine the darker recesses of society, and the impact this had on the human condition.

With the democratisation of authorship allowing any individual today, able to practice free-speech, to tell their own story via YouTube or any number of digital platforms, the role of the written narrative may become less relevant to the younger generation.

Thematically, the stories that the current generation are sharing in the digital area, are not that far from those that were shared around the fire-place, during the eighteen and nineteenth century, by individuals whom had shared some of the same fears that we have, today.

In considering this new narrative, the traditional image of the ghoul or the monster is little more than that of a product or novelty, to be enjoyed every October by children and young people. And it is the new social-landscape that can be sighted as the main villain in our collective ghost-story. How we choose to engage with the practice of telling stories in the coming years is up for debate, however, I for one feel that it is important for all of us to maintain this tradition.

In a period when truth and a fact-based reality are subjected to continuous assault by corrupted politicians and opportunists, it is important that we have an escape, one that allows us to contemplate the events taking place, in a world in which we all live. The very same stories provide us with comfort and reassurance in times of difficulty, and provide us with valuable guidance, going forward.

Life



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