

Science Studies Colloquium Series

Presents:

Thomas Conner

PhD Candidate

Communication & Science Studies

UC San Diego

Monday, November 18, 2019

12:15pm - 1:45pm

Humanities & Social Science Bldg.

Room 3027



The Augmented Reality of Modernity: A Pepper's Ghost Story

Since the digital resurrection of Tupac Shakur at a 2012 music festival, other deceased pop stars (e.g., Roy Orbison, Ronnie James Dio, Whitney Houston) have returned to concert stages. These events are multimedia social spectacles framed with futuristic discourses implying that they are “new” media, yet the technology producing each of them is a barely altered form of a 19th-century stage illusion called Pepper’s Ghost. Based on a simple optical illusion, Pepper’s Ghost was presented theatrically throughout Europe and the United States in the mid-1800s, often to public sensation. But it was not originally invented for narrative entertainment or even spiritualist séances. Its namesake, John Henry Pepper, was a chemist and a popular lecturer at a London science museum, the Royal Polytechnic Institution, where he developed the ghost illusion to proselytize for a particular strain of European modernity. Pepper’s goal was not to summon a ghost but to reveal that image as the product of superior science.

In this talk, I historicize the development and usage of Pepper’s Ghost as a boundary object—an object liminally situated between science and entertainment, amusement and instruction, and rational inquiry and superstition—in order to demonstrate how this techno-spiritualist spectacle supported the Polytechnic’s ideological programming. I will consider how the 21st-century revival of the illusion continues to promote discourses of technoscientific superiority over not only life but death. I will conclude by reflecting on the benefits of connecting media and cultural studies to STS perspectives.