

# Paranormal Forensics: Megan Plunkett's *Electric Avenue* Exhibition essay by Zachary Furste

Something's haunting *Electric Avenue*, an exhibition of new work by Los Angeles-based artist Megan Plunkett at Emalin. Like any good spectre, though, the one at 1 Holywell Lane keeps its identity just out of view. Instead, we're left with a host of uncanny copies:

- "The Intruders" and "The Invaders," photographs of proliferating telephones in anonymous motel rooms;
- "Hammers," twinned, broken, and reconstructed in unnerving detail;
- "Joe D. Badguys," a doctored portrait with a gaze that pursues us around the gallery.

What exactly have we stumbled into? An unearthly crime scene? Some originary psychic trauma? A bit of 1980s Hollywood schlock?

More to the point, should we laugh or, perhaps, shudder?[1]

## ROCK DOWNTOWN...

Electric Avenue, the story goes, became the site of London's first electric streetlights in the early 1880s. Electric Avenues soon lit up in Birmingham, Liverpool, Nottingham and around the world. Each one a thoroughfare from the old to the new. A sensational highway where otherworldly, invisible forces (electromagnetism) cross over to transform terrestrial perception (the visual experience of the city at night.) From a distance, the Avenue appears as a luminous axis of the grid that orders the supernatural into the social.

The streetlights may have been new but electric spirits were already in the air. Media historian Jeffrey Sconce has described how, during the mid-19th century, "[an occult practice called] spiritual telegraphy gave voice to previously 'invisible' beings, be they ghosts or women, whose consciousness could flow through the medium's magical wire and into the public world's material arena." [2] Electric Avenue, as originary scene, carried a current from an unknown beyond into a sensing body.

A century after streetlights inaugurated a new optics of urban life, British Airways lost the luggage that contained the latest songs of Eddy Grant, the Guyanese-British musician and songwriter. Grant had flown to Barbados to found a recording studio. Without his portfolio in hand, he drew on a memory of a potential song title gleaned from his time in South London.

"My big songs, like 'Electric Avenue,' tend to come quickly," Grant told *The Guardian* recently. "It's like visiting the bathroom – you've really got to go." [3] The buoyant Reggae fusion track would burst into a global hit a year or two later, in 1983. But unlike the single's B-Side, "Walking on Sunshine," "Electric Avenue" is no metaphorical setting. 100 years after its electrification, the market street in Brixton became a metonym for the three days of uprising and violent protest in April 1981, when South London's Black community responded to years of racist policing and institutional discrimination.

And yet the music video, key to the track's MTV-propelled success, was not shot in South London but in Barbados. By shooting at night, Grant reasoned, the Caribbean streets could more plausibly evoke those of Brixton. After all, doesn't every Anglophone city have its own Electric Avenue?

Indeed, the video's depiction of the "streets" is oblique, comprising electronically distorted neon and fluorescent signage cut against the blaring cathode ray tube from a TV that, we assume, plays coverage of the so-called Brixton riots. The song was also recorded under the cover of night. An engineer recalls needing to stay out of the way of the carpenters hammering away at Grant's studio. Working in an unbuilt studio, they improvised. The brittle roll of a drum machine snare became an engine roaring down the street. Both song and video render social urgency from a remove, in the eerie abstractions of new technological forms. From flickering abstraction, we ride the avenue to transcendence: "...*Then we take it higher.*"

Grant's track and music video hit the airwaves in 1983 just as Semiotext(e) published an English translation of Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation*, introducing the Anglophone world to one of the hottest continental critiques of the post-war image economy. In North America, Alan Sekula presented an early version of "The Body and the Archive," his landmark essay on the criminological and eugenicist roots of photography. [4] On the ascent in the New York art scene were Louise Lawler, Cindy Sherman, Sherrie Levine, and others from the 'Pictures Generation' who used appropriation to recover the ironic, submerged, and uncanny from television, movies, and magazines. By the mid-1980s, ghosts, like those channelled by the prior century's spiritual telegraphists, had overtaken the cool conceptualism of the 1960s and 1970s.

## TACTILITY AND THE FORENSIC IMAGINARY

*...evidentiary signposts that appear to him the indices of his own history, his own identity, the touchstones of his most intimate connections to the real...the readymades he will come to identify as "his" are the markers erected after the fact to commemorate an event that never happened, an encounter whose traumatic effect on him arises from the fact that he missed it. [5]*

Here are some hammers and telephones.

The hammer, what Heidegger often described as a "primordial" example of seamless subject-object fusion. A *thing*. Material icon of *Zuhandenheit* (translated as "readiness-to-hand,") the hammer is used intuitively rather than intellectually analysed. Only when the hammer breaks is a subject aware of its separateness. No longer a *thing*, a broken hammer becomes an *object*.

The analogue telephone handset, by contrast, is the quintessential fetish of 20th-century communications technology, and a perennial cinematic device. Emulating our silver screen heroes, we cradled it, twirled its cord in our fingers and whispered our secrets into its mouthpiece. Rather than restructure our material environment, as we had done for ages with hammers, the telephone refigured social intimacy and our sense of presence in terms of electrical pulses.

Yet as the hammers and telephones in *Electric Avenue* invoke these tactile intuitions and haptic memories, just as soon as they suggest that we reach out a familiar hand, an uncanny surplus emerges. We count more handsets than phone cradles, more hammers than can be wielded at once. The images are split, doubled, shot through with the unreal. Our embodied desire for connection runs up against uncanny leftovers. We feel something like interdimensional vertigo.

Then, there's the forensic double produced, in criminological jargon, by "event analysis." The commission of a crime takes on the weight of an ordinary event, as the broken tool ruptures a certain orientation to the world.

Inspired by the ubiquitous but protean forensic term of the "matching image", Plunkett generated the "Hammers" series by matching "The Hammer (Left)" to "The Hammer (Right)." Like the "demonstrative evidence" that fabricates the "way things were" at the scene before the crime, the Hammers appeal to that other place and time: where it all went down.

Crime scene reconstructionists, investigators and litigators use matching images to define the contours of an event, after the fact. More than merely defining, these images transduce the event into power; visual narrative becomes juridical "fact." Blown up for juries and attested to by experts with laser pointers, matching images are faked photos that acquire the force of law.

The proliferating telephones in "The Intruders" and "The Invaders" likewise stem from criminology. The project began from a photograph that Plunkett found in the LAPD's archive of materials related to a celebrity death at the Chateau Marmont in 1982. With each permutation of the evidentiary image, its credibility gives way to a pulpy constructedness. At first, we laugh: "how delightfully camp!" But the shudder soon follows as we recognise that this same gaze reconstructs (and inflicts) very real traumas.

The bedside tables and rotary dials continue in a kind of lurid forensic animism, their frames rendered not with documentary precision as much as sensitivity to the objects' unconscious charges. An alien, bureaucratic vision beckons from the other side of the subject/object divide. Does it irrupt from that glint of light? Out of this shadowy reflection? "Nothing is insignificant to record if it catches one's attention." [6] Clues abound and yet we feel no closer to their source. These motel rooms might be found along any highway in the American West, and yet, they're unmistakably from another world. A character offscreen nervously whispers "where am I?" and, receiving no response, asks instead "who are you?"

#### NOTES

[1] Siegfried Kracauer wrote in 1927 about grandchildren looking upon a photograph of their old-fashioned grandmother: "They laugh, and at the same time they shudder. For through the ornamentation of the costume from which the grandmother has disappeared, they think they glimpse a moment of time past, a time that passes without return." From "Photography," trans. Thomas Y. Levin in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 49.

[2] *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2000), 14.

[3] "How we made Eddy Grant's Electric Avenue," Interview with Dave Simpson, *theguardian.com*, published 3 September 2018.

[4] Eventually published in *October* vol. 39 (Winter 1986), 3-64.

[5] Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 71.

[6] Plunkett gleaned this gem from the FBI Field Manual of Crime Scene Photography.