

Hauntology, or Spectral Space  
Thomas Mical, 2007

For this 29<sup>th</sup> issue of *Perforations*, the editors have taken the opportunity to (perhaps compulsively) return to a topic of frequent attention in many of the earlier editions of the *Perforations oeuvre*, specifically a lingering and murmuring re-visitation of the Derridean conceit of “hauntology,” here modified into a quest to identify what barely sensed “spectral” notions can be seen gliding from past to future sightings of theory – in what has become a master trope of speculative trans-disciplinary theory.

The irresistible impulse behind our preliminary “call for papers” was to perhaps pull in some new voices, some new visions, around a topic that, by definition, can never be closed, sealed, or completed. For we should state that it has always been real work, in the manner of Kojève or Lacan, to try to get rid of ghosts, especially what you know to be your own unique ghosts. The issue has been a slow accumulation over many months, an almost imperceptible process of becoming-present or becoming-immanent, much like the ghost figures themselves. The scholarship selected is in many ways overdue, and we suspect also still somewhat “untimely”, here in the Nietzschean sense of discourses or figures that are premonitions.

For to clarify the question concerning hauntology in relation to its prior order – ontology – we should work and cast back to the prior twentieth century critiques of ontology, which were other than a mere crisis of appearances; or the winnowing of sense into a science of the congealed; or reduction of blocks of perceptions become affects. Ontology is the science of all phenomena that have existed and will exist, visible and invisible – and Being, as the object of analysis, must be contrasted with the thin film that slips over and mutes what is taken for routine, for the “everyday,” or the real. The twentieth century history of philosophy within the Continental tradition can be read as the historical analysis of ontology, of unqualified Being, as plentitude, as the near-stasis between potentialities, as reserve, as fundament, or as ground, Being as constant and consistent. The analysis of Being, rethought in the 20<sup>th</sup>C, was begun with Being as Being ALWAYS IN RELATION to something elusive and therefore “other” – and ontology became the analysis of the imperceptible minimal difference between two contrary concepts – existence and essence / being and nothingness (Sartre) / presence and absence (Derrida) / sense and non-sense (Deleuze). Of ontology, it has come to be crucial to distinguish essence and appearance, and their dissonance in consciousness (the axiomatic scission of phenomenology), but it is also crucial to recognize that Being is that is a furtive dark convergence between essence and appearance (and ultimately sense). Ontology without these burdens, without this potential dual nature of containing and separating before sense, is the trap of a flattening metaphysics or onto-theology. Being is the crucial philosophical foundation with the characteristics shared with the lesser construct of “the landscape”, one that contains but resists disintegration and disappearance. And so it appears Being itself is always to be thought with a slight trembling or tremor, because as a singular unity with divergent characteristics, it is always ready to become more or less than one. The term ontology is a signifier of conceptual space that reserves the irregular and asymmetrical potentialities towards presence or absence, towards appearance and disappearance, and can thus be likened to a hazy or distorted extension of the mysteries of the *chora* (the never-empty space before endless images) in Plato’s *Timaeus* – a chamber whose works are the birth of being from non-being. The ontology of Being is a reserve known through perceived difference(s). Being is again more or less than one, in that it holds the inexhaustible murmuring of becoming, and there is always difference, so that even Being can be defined as differential to the essences it holds, and differential to sense.

Jean-Luc Nancy has often stated and implied that the contemporary works of philosophy delineate a movement from ontology to sense, and thus participate in the necessity of abandoning Being (see *The Birth to Presence* and *Being Singular Plural*). The process of bounding and delimiting Being in relation to its (desired) other/s inaugurated in modern philosophy by Hegel in *The Logic of Science* and reaches a plateau in the Heideggerian turn from the onto-theology of *Being and Time* to the analysis of *Dasein* in his later works. From the turbulent dialectical Being and its other in Hegel to the retrograde movement requiring subjective “sparing and preserving” in the name of dwelling, we can sketch, following Nancy, the history of ontology as the history of the abandonment of ontology, and abandonment not to be lightly characterized as a crisis, but acknowledged as the necessary ground for the appearance of inessential ghosts and apparitions. This is perhaps the most populist of Derrida’s legacy to the debate over the necessity and use-value of ontology (over commodities) – that there is always a little spectral excess, a minimal remainder, a trace to come back as an errant erring figure. The imperceptible difference, after Derrida, is a trace that is also the ghost-effect that indicates a prior hauntology, one that comes first before ontology, and always returns. Derrida reverses the ontology / difference relation by developing this enigmatic third term – *hauntologie* – that is derived from both, but simultaneously explains both, an intellectual conjuring trick where the spectral after-mage of the thought of ontology becomes its prior foundation – by situating hauntology as prior to ontology, not as its future (or future anterior) state (of mourning), but perhaps as the unexpected chain-rattling return of repressed difference within any sweeping static ontological claims. In arguing characteristically for this counterintuitive (read ‘deconstructive’) reversal, he challenged the exclusion or distancing of Hegelian Spirit from Being. Simply put, hauntology is a “logic of haunting [that] would not be merely larger and more powerful than an ontology or a thinking of Being . . . [but] would harbor within itself, but like circumscribed places or particular effects, eschatology and teleology themselves.” [Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p.10.] The theological as ontology is still present, and here the theological is both the Heideggerian fear of onto-theology as well as its inversion, the material world as its emanation. Heidegger appears to unjustly reverse the Nietzschean argument against metaphysics (sketched elegantly as “How the ‘True World’ Finally Became a Fable” in *Twilight of the Idols*), and unjustly misrepresents Nietzsche as the last metaphysician, a role Heidegger as double-agent has come to most resemble, even as Heidegger seeks to release Being from the dual traps of onto-theology and metaphysical conceits. Contrast Heidegger’s sense of Being as care, wonder, and attention with the non-sense of hauntology’s fear, shrinking, and flight. The critique of metaphysics demanded by Heidegger’s call is answered in Derrida’s immersion into the (literary) logic of specters, where Derrida now reverses Marx’s inverted Hegelianism, performing a simple double inversion that follow the logic of the “negation of negation” that leaves an ethereal Hegelianism AS reserve into the realm of the haunted. Hauntology echoes the inexhaustible murmur of Being, the imperceptible movement of Being, and the impossible medium of the spectral.

Derrida’s specters of Marx attempts to interact with a crisis of Marxism / post-Marxism through the scandalous figure of the Romanticist ghost in Hegel’s Marx. The critics of Derrida’s work are multiple, and yet the well-known controversy over the book *Specters of Marx* was justified, though it seems the exhumation of Marx’s Hegelianism and Romanticism refutes the adage that everyone loves a ghost story, and the intention to spook Marxism has become a separate genre of theory itself, one whose discussions do not move beyond the ghost figure into its higher optics or spatial logic, often just a euphemism for the uncanny, or the unnamable. Antonio Negri argues correctly that hauntology is not just metaphysical but theological: “In playing with the specters of being . . . it loses itself in that which is ‘inaccessible to man,’ in the ‘infinitely other’ . . . The game is

played out in mysticism . . . Why? Why this regressive step back? . . . to the oldest of reactionary ontologies: the theological one?” (Antonio Negri in Michael Sprinker (ed.), *Ghostly Demarcations*, p. 14 cited in Eva Corredor review, *Philosophy and Literature* 25.2, p.357). And yet the ghost is always already a signifier of metaphysical and certainly theological difference – in the liminal realm, the thick and foggy space between the sense of the world and its non-sensical other. But it is not any systematic or recognizable theology that is conjured up, but a poetics of ghosts, and also conjures up the nearly invisible figure of Freud (though this secret source of this text is lodged in footnote 38, p. 195). Frederic Jameson, in his review of Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* in the *New Left Review* entitled “Marx’s Purloined Letter” notes that “Derrida’s mocking answer – hauntology – is a ghostly echo if there ever was one . . . which promises tangible in return, on which you cannot build, which cannot even be counted on to materialize when you want it to . . . all it says . . . is that the living present is scarcely as self-sufficient as it claims to be, that we would do well not to count on its density and solidity.” (Jameson, n.p., see <http://newleftreview.org/A1791>) So even the immediacy of presence, to sense, is a soluble vision of soluble space.

And isn’t modernity itself the difficult relation of the solid melting into air, of Being becoming unbearably light (from Parmenides to Kundera), of aerial projections of fantasies and desires upon the sepulchral stones of the past, in short a modernity that is itself a movement towards the ghostly, modernity as always already plural, *modernité* as the admixture of dual movements: movement towards the ephemeral, fugitive, and contingent; also movement towards the eternal, the immutable (Baudelaire and Benjamin), a modernity whose architecture of stark white reductivist planes inviting projection is the triplet of both cinema and psychoanalysis, all the shock of the new haunted by Victorian ghosts, all proposing a world becoming-smooth, ambient, vaporous, ethereal. This slight modernity becoming-vaporous, however we need to define it, remains recognizable but elusive and unclear, like a cloud. The cloud is without density or solidity - as image, as signifier, it is irregular, sensible but difficult to represent (see the perspectival impossibility of the signifier cloud that haunts landscapes in Hubert Damisch, */Cloud/*), indifferent to perspectival optics or haptic *habitus*, a common figure of indeterminacy and historically the masking of the primitive image of exteriority – exteriority which itself is always a space-without image. The cloud, the fog, and the blur are the frequent modernist avatars for what is barely perceived but has no causal rational sense – clouds evoke sense and wonder (Rilke), but a sense-without-reason, the mist of pre-reflective consciousness, like the perceptions of eyes newly opened, often assigned to the mock-category of vagueness and all that is light modernity. Though categorically distinct, these vaporous (dis)figures share many of the characteristic attributes of the ghost. The procession of specters is from modernity becoming-vaporous to late modernity becoming-hauntology. In this sense, hauntology is an ephemeral and eternal non-sense.

The medium who communicates with a ghost presupposes a medium of communication, yet there are a great many phenomena that appear within the world of sense that are as unexplainable as they are haunting. There are conditions that do not fall into the strong theoretical category of the uncanny, but belong elsewhere. Recall the sense you may have had of the unexplained cold spot in the room, unexplained creaks and door slams, the inexplicable slowly moving stain coming from elsewhere, late night disturbances in your peripheral vision, that strange internal sensation seemingly remote, the certainty and uncertainty of mistaken identities, the panic of misplaced objects, those unpredictable arresting perceptions not easily explained, such as short term entrancement while staring at nothing, the necessity of always including the category of “unknown” or “undecidable” or “other” into any classification system, the recognition of vagueness or ambiguity as a concept, and

encounters which make us distrust the absolute continuity of perception, which hover (levitate) between real and imaginary. There is a whole host of sensory phenomena, truly non-sensical sensations, which are negated or suppressed to maintain the continuity of perception, the continuity of self, of dwelling in the world, dwelling-becoming-haunted.

The fetish characteristics of the commodity, as dwelling, are revealed in the medium of the doll's house (see <http://www.pd.org/topos/perforations/perf5/Doll-Universe-interview.html>), which is both an overarching concern of *Perforations*, and also the precise spatial model of the publication's volumes. The fascinating alterity (or unbearable creepiness) of the everyday dollhouse is bound up within the fugitive presence and absence of expected sense-effects. For adults it exposes as nonsensical or sinister the prior joy of childhood potentialities, cut-away flat in framed in the sectional spatial logic of the dollhouse's "inside." Bachelard in *Poetics of Space*, affirmed the status of the house as container – drawing upon the coiling shell and the cabinet as enclosed metaphoric homes, while disregarding the musty and chthonic essence of the house in the uninhabitable basement articulated in Jungian theory. In the near dark, the sense of the subterranean is usually unique scents of a malodorous damp of near-invisible organisms. But the traditional ghost usually appears in the reified air of the attic, and yet the persistent locus of spatial /sensual unease remains the subterranean. The basement, as the negative ground and void invisible to but structuring the dwelling above, serves as the archetype of the dwelling. As an emptied container, the basement is the Platonic cave of fantasy, where the stoniness of stone is the real and also the surface of the projection of the imaginary.

The ghost is situated as unseen observer, though the ghost can never simply watch and wait, or to observe the constraint to observe without knowing. Only rarely can the ghost make contact with the living, or perform the greatest act – to move the objects of the ontological realm – except as dramatic effect. The ghost, as trapped within and outside being, or more precisely still within abandoned Being, rarely knows its fate (the paranormal midwife series *Ghost Whisperer*) – and it appears that eschatology and teleology are no longer available. So there is within hauntology a double-limit: the realm of sense and the realm of hauntology can converge, as exception and singularity, into a ghost horizon that is differential from the hermeneutic horizon of the phenomenologically available world. The horizon is the unattainable limit-experience, after Blanchot, whose two forms of the imaginary, and two forms of dying, describe precisely the dialectical fusion integrated into the horizontal bar of the sensuous landscapes we dwell in. The ghost, cruelly barred from living, sense, and the real, and doubly barred from the other sacred landscapes unto which they should drift, lingers in the most vaporous indeterminacy, in the fog outside of sense and reason.

The domains of ghosts are a hypothetical spatial splaying of the construct of differential hauntology, founded upon the excluded figure, image, or essence of what was once present. The ghost, in its place, which resists mapping or dwelling, is the absent half of an essential relation (for Hegel, in the haunted book *The Science of Logic*, identifies the essential relation, the clarity of essences, as the distinction between inside vs. outside). The ghost, as apparition or media effect, is not yet present in the void or abyss that stands for but masks pure exteriority. In a sense, the ghost turns the inside / outside dichotomy inside-out, becoming the inframince identified by Duchamp – here the infrathin other of either term, a translucent granularity drifting across the perceptual realms of media-sense. The ghost is the almost degree zero of sense, both inside and outside sense, both becoming-smooth and becoming soluble. As a figure before the landscape, the specter's appearance is the event of uncanny other of landscape, of the experiential horizon, and the simultaneous unnerving possibility of an ethereal image-space, ambient atmosphere of near-missed encounters. The ghost is identical with the haunt; and there is no spectre without/before spectral space.

The absence of life lingers in the everyday; place retain traces and vestiges almost as if they were recording media, and yet these provocative remnants / re-runs of the past are always curiously misread. Every abandoned building is for a child a haunted building, haunted by the memory machine of the subject, haunted by the faded missed encounters invisible in past events. The abandoned buildings of modernity are but the after-images of the *horror vacui* the architects of modernity sought to barricade against.

The ghost is transformed in modernity, in the new optic of modernity, identified by Walter Benjamin, whose first material clue, in the mock crime scene photographs of Atget, is the impossibility of pure transparency. Ghosts are always coded as translucent, though the entire range of optical potential should also exist in the para-optics of the spectral, but the appearance of transparency itself has become a displaced signifier of this hauntology. Transparency is the promise of exteriority, but this comes with a price: “modernity knows itself to be exposed (this is both a threat and a desire) to what is not itself and is not there, but is nonetheless very close or continually approaching.” (Jean-Luc Nancy, *A Finite Thinking*, p.301)

Where once they appeared with gravitas and issued clear and distinct oracular statements whose meanings were enigmas, now popular figures of ghosts appear to stutter visibly and audibly, and have now been compelled by our expectations to display a host of televisual effects – like us, they have been made to adopt to new special effects of new media techniques to recast them at ontologically alterior. Let us construct a filmic spectrum of recent savvy ghost media, specifically the films *The Sixth Sense* (1999), *The Others* (2001), and *White Noise* (2005).

The Romanticist exaltation of the shocking “otherness” of creatures - uncanny or undead – is uncharacteristically smoothed over in *The Sixth Sense* (1999). For the boy who can see and hear the ghosts lingering in their haunts, the everyday and the supernatural commerce and interact without visual distinction – a double-vision of living and dead are brought together into a single perspective. This filmic reversal of the necessary distinction between seeing beings and what is otherwise-than-being is the shock of the banality of the afterlife, and is the closely guarded secret, even to the counseling ghost-who-doesn’t know. In this supplemented world, the ghosts also duplicate this double-vision, unable to distinguish the body from its spectral double. The absence of distinct televisual effects for these ghosts makes this crucial distinction an absent relation, rendering every site a haunted site, and every potential encounter a missed encounter.

*The Others* (2001) is exemplary for its portrayal of the discontinuity of the orders of Being and non-being becoming (almost) smoothed over, dissolved into one another, manifested in the figure of the omnipresent fog, as pressure, limit-experience, or “thick space” that cannot be exited. This is the cinematic form of the Hegelian principle of “negation of negation”, filmed in an Edwardian setting but with a prior Victorian sense. The ephemeral fog is the figure of the impossibility of crossing, of space become image and sense. Fog is always an inversion of the charm and nobility of the clouds above, fallen down and around us into vague impressions and spatial disorientation. In this film the occupants of the house-mausoleum become afflicted with spectral sounds, fugitive subjects, and irrational events, and curiously these haunting-effects unhinge the ghosts, compressed into the dwelling that is itself compressed within “cat’s paws” of the fog-landscape. The old equation of dwelling with *habitus* is here sublated into a house become haunt/ed, more precisely a multiplicity of haunting-effects, as missed encounters, across the orders of Being and non-being, across the registers of sense and non-sense. *The Others*

The return of Victorian-era equation of occult as science drives the technological ghost film *White Noise* (2005). The film documents the search for communication with dead ghosts-who-know through broadcast media forms makes the ghosts disappear except as recorded or televisual effects –

the séance is dispersed through the electro-mechanical ether, as if the media were a “wax tablet” for psychic otherworldly phenomena. The ghost, as trace, can be located with great difficulty through the conventional media’s fog – within the static, distortion, screen ‘snow’, ghost images and phantom signals, always as secret signals concealed within ambient murmurs and stray pixels. In the film these communications bring the continuation of aggression and violence of the everyday, almost with the anti-teleological view of a dire endless Egyptian afterlife, set in the industrial sublime of the abandoned factory. The ghost effect of media is oddly violent, a ethical backlash into the present from the imperceptible spectral space. This film constructs a proper hauntology of the everyday as double through undecidable media signals, and presents the ghost effect as the cumulative buildup of digital traces as “noise” within every signal. Noise is the ghost-effect, and all media are potentially haunting.

For Perforations 29, we asked for informed speculations in art, \_literature, architecture, and aesthetics - as the traces of the other-worldly are soluble significations and effects in these disciplines at the neglected margins of sense. We continue to be concerned with the ethereal others which are never quite present or absent, and requested works on these specific topics:

- uncanny presences outside the frame of representation,
- anamorphic blurs of concepts or images,
- leaking, stained, or spectral spaces,
- disappearing figures or soluble identities,
- of all that sometimes works like miasmas, pneumas, and vapors,
- and all possible manifestations of specters (real or imaginary).

This search\_included speculative revenants of repetitions of all sorts: including catastrophic trauma (the spectral delays/deferrals of Freudian \_'nachtraglichkeit') as well as any embeddings of notions of 'eternal \_return' as having hauntological portent for communities and thought to come. Though ghosts continue to be popular cultural figures (and so history is the history of ghost stories), their figurations in the register of the imaginary is not so far from the real as we would hope...