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# Specters

Esther Peeren

**Affirmation** as an ambiguous critical mode would entail “not to simply love everything, but rather to really turn around both sides (love and hate), to avert the immediate (perhaps) natural tendency that you want to reject something if you do not agree or dislike it, and instead, to try it the other way around – to exercise a non-negation until space – a different spacing – will open up” (Kaiser, Thiele, and Bunz 2014). This resonates with Jacques Derrida’s injunction that, when confronted with a ghost or specter (as a figure of radical alterity), we should not give in to the urge to exorcize it, but should instead learn to live *with* it (Derrida 1994, xxviii). Such living *with*, as the just way of dealing with a haunting, is not self-evident (hence the need to learn how to do it) or straightforward, for, in addition to not being negated, the specter should also not be forced to assimilate. Haunting is reconfigured as a relational dynamic of **responsibility** with unpredictable results and considerable **risks** that cannot be fully controlled by either party, as Hamlet and his father’s ghost find out at great cost in William Shakespeare’s tragedy, from which Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* (1994) takes off.

Specters, then, put agency – as sovereign control over one’s actions and their consequences – into question. What we are left with is not so much agency circumscribed or agency to a lesser degree – as **semi-agency**, in its reference to a quantitative

168 halving, seems to imply – but agency itself rendered as ambiguous and ephemeral as the specter. For, Derrida insists, a specter is not half-alive and half-dead, but something that, in full, exists in apparently mutually exclusive states, oscillating unpredictably between life and death, visibility and invisibility, materiality and immateriality, as well as the past, present, and future. Rather than dividing itself between these states, the specter exemplifies how each is divided from itself by its others, which do not remain separate from it, but are always already **entangled** with it.

In Derrida's terms, a spectral "*living on* [sur-vie]" appears as "a survival whose possibility in advance comes to disjoin or dis-adjust the identity to itself of the living present as well as of any effectivity" (Derrida 1994, xx). Effectivity – the ability to have effects that constitutes agency – comes apart not into quantifiable parts, but is undone in a more fundamental manner by the specter as "*more than one/no more one* [*le plus d'un*]," as simultaneously multiple and heterogeneous (xx). The specter, then, does not merely do something to **temporality** by putting time out of joint, and to being by transforming ontology into *hauntology*. It also does something to doing by making agency ambiguous and dynamic, causing it to wander in time, in space, and between what or who haunts, and what or whom is haunted. As a result, haunting manifests as an insistent following – in Dutch, aptly, it is translated as *achtervolgd worden* (being followed) – that also indicates a fundamental dependency: as popular culture teaches, ghosts haunt because they need something from the living (revenge, justice, reparation, assistance) and, conversely, the living conjure ghosts because they want them to provide access to the past or to other **worlds**. In itself, following already combines the active and the passive as a deliberate, insistent, and insidious action that does not determine its own course. Thus, haunting can be said to stage an "entangled state of agencies" (Barad 2007, 23) where **power** and dependency are not clearly distinguishable. In the depersonalized form of the German *es spukt* ("it haunts"), moreover, which lacks

an identifiable haunting agent or force, what appears is “an unnameable and neutral power, that is, undecidable, neither active nor passive, an an-identity that, *without doing anything*, invisibly occupies places belonging finally neither to us nor to it” (Derrida 1994, 172). Without being or doing anything determinable, the *es spukt* nevertheless constitutes a force that **affects** its surroundings and can make something happen.

The Derridean specter also figures the condition of being implicated, as it is impossible not to be haunted, even for ghosts. Thus, Karl Marx is not only seen to haunt us but is himself conceived as haunted, together with Max Stirner, by Hegel. According to Derrida, it is impossible not to receive inheritances from the past and such inheritances cannot be refused, even if they can also never completely be known and appropriated. Something must be done with these spectral inheritances in order to live *with* them, and this something marks a site of critical agency: “‘One must’ means one must filter, sift, criticize, one must sort out several different possibles that inhabit the same injunction” (16). That the spectral inheritance has the power to make one act does not divest such compelled acts from agency altogether, but redefines the latter as entangled and ambiguous – as spectral agency (Peeren 2014, 16–24).

While ghosts appear to wield considerable power – including in Derrida’s account, which ascribes to them the intimidating visor effect (the ability to see without being seen) as well as the ability to put time out of joint and to hand down injunctions – their dependency on being acknowledged by the living ensures that they are never all-powerful. At the same time, they are also never powerless, not even when their ghostliness marks extreme dispossession and vulnerability to exploitation rather than a haunting ability to instill fear and fascination, as is the case for those inhabiting the necropolitical death-worlds of the colonial, postcolonial, and neocolonial regimes described by Achille Mbembe: “My concern is those forms of sovereignty whose central project is not the struggle for autonomy but the generalized

170 instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations" (Mbembe 2003b, 14). Even these "living-dead (ghosts)" are capable of making something happen, not necessarily deliberately or efficiently, but by the very condition of constant wandering and **transformation** that defines their spectral existence, which renders them simultaneously vulnerable and elusive (Mbembe 2003a, 1).

Antonio Negri, in his response to *Specters of Marx*, complains that Derrida's theory and the "new spectrality" of postindustrial labor renders spectrality so pervasive that nothing solid, not even the worker's body, can be set against it:

The new spectrality is here – and we're entirely within this real illusion ... There's no longer an outside, neither a nostalgic one, nor a mythic one, nor any urgency or reason to disengage us from the spectrality of the real ... The subject is therefore unlocatable in a world that has lost all measure, because in this spectral reality no measure is perceived or perceptible. (Negri 1999, 9)

For Negri, the fact that spectrality now fully encompasses the worker removes any capacity to act: if the subject cannot even be located and is of the same ephemeral quality as the capitalist system, how can it do anything to challenge it? He links the inability to act with spectrality, even though he also describes the capitalist system as highly effective in establishing a "ghostly dominion" (10). Yet, if there can be a spectrality that signifies dominion (and thus, surely, a form of agency), might the spectralized subject not also partake of it? This is exactly what Derrida proposes. The ambivalent force of *es spukt*, invisible yet not beyond being perceived, potentially allows spectralized subjects – the living-dead – to struggle against the spectralizing system by which they are produced as exploitable and expendable. As the familiar horror film scenario shows, the ghost can indeed come to haunt or possess its conjurer, but it can do so only as a ghost

and not by laying claim to an unambiguous visibility, materiality, presence, and aliveness.

Spectral agency can refer to ghostly acts or to acts in the face of ghosts. For Derrida, as noted, the latter ought to be aimed at living *with* specters rather than at their exorcism or assimilation. If not exactly advocating a *caring for* specters, in the double sense of taking care of and having affinity with, this does imply an affirmative relationality and responsibility that might also be a criticality. The specter, conceived as a haunting entity, confirms our implicatedness in the world, our inability to separate ourselves from our multiple and complex entanglements with it, but at the same time it also stresses the element of "one must." We may not be able to choose what or whom we must care for or about, as ghosts and their spectral inheritances press themselves upon us. Yet critical force may reside in how we give shape to our living *with* them.

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