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Cultural Analysis, Close Reading and the Cultural Imagination

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Publication date

2019

Document Version

Final published version

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Citation for published version (APA):

Peeren, E. (2019). *Attending to Ghosts: Cultural Analysis, Close Reading and the Cultural Imagination*. (Inaugural lecture; No. 611). Universiteit van Amsterdam.

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Attending to Ghosts

Attending to Ghosts
*Cultural Analysis, Close Reading and the Cultural
Imagination*

Rede

uitgesproken bij de aanvaarding van het ambt van
hoogleraar Cultural Analysis
aan de Faculteit der Geesteswetenschappen
van de Universiteit van Amsterdam
op vrijdag 27 september 2019

door

Esther Peeren

This is inaugural lecture 611, published in this series of the University of Amsterdam.

Lay-out: JAPES, Amsterdam

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*Mevrouw de Rector Magnificus,
Mijnheer de Decaan,
Geachte collega's,
Geachte promovendi en studenten,
Gewaardeerde vrienden en familie,*

Vanwege het grote aantal toehoorders dat geen Nederlands verstaat, niet in de minste plaats mijn echtgenoot Naj, zal ik u vandaag in het Engels toespreken.

Attending to Ghosts

Over the past eighteen years I have occupied more than ten offices in different buildings of the Faculty of Humanities, including the much-missed Bungehuis, in roles ranging from Mieke Bal's personal assistant, to PhD candidate at the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis, to Assistant Professor of Literary Studies, Associate Professor of Globalization Studies, and now Professor of Cultural Analysis. As a result, I quite often sense the spectral presence of previous versions of myself, a sense that is particularly strong today, as in 2005, I stood in this very same spot, before some of the same people, at my PhD defense. I also occasionally catch a glimpse of a future me, still distant but summoned each time the form to register a new PhD candidate requires me to indicate my retirement date: the 1st of October 2043, at least for now. Sensing these past and future me's can be unsettling – if only because they remind me that I have committed to an academic career, leaving other possible paths untrodden – but also uplifting, making me realize how much I have grown in this Faculty and particularly in the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis, a.k.a. ASCA, where I have found my true intellectual home.

One day, after at least a few more office moves, I will no longer have a place here, but I hope even then to linger, as a friendly ghost, a certain spirit inspiring a certain approach, of cultural analysis, of close reading – an approach that highlights the power of cultural imaginations to acknowledge marginalized pasts and presents, and to conjure more inclusive and sustainable futures. It is this approach, which I argue is one of 'attending to ghosts' that I want to outline for you today.

What do I mean by ‘attending to ghosts’? I have to disappoint anyone expecting this question to lead to a discussion of the possibility of life after death. I am not a paranormal investigator and this will not be a séance. Rather than looking for actual ghosts, I focus on ghosts as metaphors capable of doing theoretical work. Conceiving of the persistent effects of colonialism, the marginalized lives of undocumented migrants or the threat of environmental catastrophe as ‘ghostly,’ ‘spectral’ or ‘haunting’ does not merely create lively images, but can help to come to a deeper understanding of these phenomena. In the volumes *Popular Ghosts* and *The Spectralities Reader*, edited with my fellow ghost-thinker and good friend María del Pilar Blanco of the University of Oxford (Blanco and Peeren 2010; Blanco and Peeren 2013), and in my monograph, *The Spectral Metaphor* (Peeren 2014), the main aim was to emphasize that this metaphor (which is really a set of metaphors, including those of the ghost, the specter, the spirit, the phantom and haunting, possession, conjuration and exorcism) should not be generalized. Not everything is like a ghost and not everything that is like a ghost is like a ghost in the same way, if only because, across history and in different cultures, many types of ghosts are found, fulfilling a range of functions and evoking divergent responses, from fear to fascination.

Figure 1 *New Yorker* cartoon by Bruce Eric Kaplan, ‘All that coffee and all these ghosts are making me jittery.’ *New Yorker* 1 July 2013, p. 62.



"All that coffee and all these ghosts are making me jittery."

The translucent, white-sheeted ghosts featured in this 2013 *New Yorker* cartoon by Bruce Eric Kaplan are only one example of what a ghost can look like (Figure 1). Significantly, the reason this cartoon is funny is because the woman on the couch ascribes her jitteriness not only to the apparition of no less than five ghosts in her living room, but also, and in the first place, to having drunk too much coffee: 'All that coffee and all these ghosts are making me jittery.' The downturned mouths of the ghosts suggest their dismay at having the effect of their supernatural presence equated and subordinated to that of something as mundane as coffee, when surely their presence alone should be enough to disturb, and to do so beyond the point of mere jitteriness. The joke, then, hinges on the ghosts not being attended to as expected.

Both the ghosts and the expectations about the kind of reaction they will inspire need to be understood in their specificity for us to get the joke. The same goes for *any* instantiation of the spectral metaphor. Whenever something is called 'ghostly' or 'haunting' we should ask what exactly it is thought to have in common with a ghost or haunting, and what the highlighting of this communality tells us, both about that which is deemed 'ghostly' or 'haunting', and about ghosts and haunting as concepts. A metaphor, after all, does not work through simple substitution, but establishes a dynamic interplay between two terms that carries over meaning in both directions.

So, in what ways has the spectral metaphor been used by myself and others since becoming, in the so-called 'spectral turn' of the 1990s, somewhat of a 'master trope' (Luckhurst 2002: 527) across the humanities and social sciences? And what can be learned from attending to this metaphor in its different guises?

The French philosopher Jacques Derrida, in what is undoubtedly the most influential text of the spectral turn, *Specters of Marx*, first published in French in 1993, spins out a reading of the ghost in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* into an account of the specter as a figure that puts time out of joint by simultaneously returning from the past and announcing its imminent re-appearance in the future (Derrida 1994). The specter, for Derrida, stands for the entanglement of past, present and future, as well as for the impossibility of locating singular origins – even in its first appearance, after all, the ghost in *Hamlet* is also already a return of Hamlet's father. In Derrida's famous neologism, the specter turns ontology into *hauntology*.

Although it is effective in challenging teleological accounts of history and conceptions of identity-as-selfsameness, I find Derrida's account of spectrality too generalizing. In positing somewhat of an Everyghost, he glosses over the specificities of the ghost of Hamlet's father (as emerging, for example, from a distinct moment in the history of Christianity). He also does not sufficiently

consider the gap between the power wielded by this sovereign specter, as the ghost of a King (indicated by his imposing posture in the Henri Fuseli print on the cover of the first English translation of *Specters of Marx*), and the powerlessness of other spectral figures such as those the Cameroonian political theorist Achille Mbembe describes as suffering under present-day necropolitical regimes oriented toward ‘the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations’ (2003: 14). The latter have little in common with the commanding ghost depicted by Shakespeare or the terrifying ghosts of horror movies. They resemble a different type of ghost whose invisibility and immateriality signify insignificance, expendability and a radical lack of agency. Instead of being shoved onto one hauntological heap, then, each instance of the spectral metaphor should be attended to in its specificity.

Avery Gordon’s 1997 study *Ghostly Matters* is more attuned to the fact that not all ghosts are equal, as is clear from her careful reading of what the simultaneously possessive and dispossessed ghost in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* reveals about the horrors of slavery (Gordon 2008). Since then, the spectral metaphor has been used to conceptualize how slavery and other histories of violent oppression, as well as their legacies, have been ‘ghosted’ (forgotten, repressed, or actively erased), while also maintaining a haunting presence.¹ Other scholars have detailed the ghostliness of present-day phenomena, from finance capitalism and big data (in their seeming ungraspability and incontestability)² to the experiences of what I call ‘living ghosts’ – people like undocumented migrants or domestic workers, whose lives are characterized by a specific form of invisibility (Peeren 2014: 14). More recently, attention has focused on the spectral metaphor’s ability to elucidate our relation to the future now that we face, as the editors of a recent volume entitled *Futures & Fictions* put it, ‘the spectre of all kinds of futures likely being curtailed’ (Gunkel, Hameed and O’Sullivan 2017: 11). At a time when the future no longer appears as a potentiality, but as a possible, probable *no future*, conceiving of it as spectral or haunting offers a way to think this future as impressing itself upon the present – and therefore as requiring action right here, right now – but also as something that is not linear, singular, unitary, or certain, and thus capable of being changed.

As emphasized in another recent volume, *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*, one half of which is titled ‘Ghosts,’ a prominent characteristic of ghosts is their ‘indeterminacy’ (Tsing et al. 2017: G2). Because it is never clear what exactly they are, ghosts can teach us how to deal with uncertainty, with not-knowing, and how to do so in a way that amounts to what Donna Haraway calls ‘staying with the trouble’. In her book of that title, Haraway writes

that ‘staying with the trouble requires learning to be truly present ... as mortal creatures entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings’ (2016: 1). This notion of ‘learning to be truly present’, much like Derrida’s injunction to live *with* ghosts rather than to exorcize them, implies taking note of and responsibility for our inevitable, deep entanglements with what is other to us by *attending to* these entanglements (notably, one of the dictionary meanings of ‘to attend’ is ‘to be present at’).

Attending to ghosts, then, requires for them to first be acknowledged. But what if that does not happen? What if impending environmental disaster is not seen as a haunting requiring a response, but as a figment of the imagination or a distant problem that can be endlessly deferred? What if the trouble is not stayed with or attended to because it is not recognized *as* trouble?

Not All Ghosts Haunt

This is where it becomes necessary to rethink the relationship between ghosts and haunting. Haunting tends to be seen as an inalienable attribute of ghosts – making it possible for Derrida to use *hauntology* as shorthand for his theory of spectrality. Gordon, too, in describing a haunting as ‘an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known’ (2008: xvi), presents ghosts and haunting as inextricably entwined. Against this, I want to suggest that certain preconditions need to be met before a repressed or unresolved social violence can make itself known in a way that produces a sense of what Gordon calls ‘something-to-be-done’ (2008: xvi). A certain quality of attention and attendance – a readiness to wait upon and heed the ghost, to *mind* it – is required on the part of society (or at least a critical mass within it), or else how can it be explained that not all unresolved pasts, disavowed presents or catastrophic futures make themselves known with equal force?

In the end, haunting implies more than the mere presence of a ghost, as David Lowery’s 2017 film *A Ghost Story* shows. In this film, a young man, identified in the credits as C., dies in a car accident and returns, as a ghost, to the house he lived in with his girlfriend, M. His status as a ghost is signaled by his appearing as a white sheet with black eye holes. It is hard to think of a more hackneyed portrayal, yet the ghost turns out to be anything but a cliché as the film confounds our expectations of what a ghost should be able to do and what a ghost film should look and sound like. In long takes, the camera registers C.’s ghost observing M. grieve and eventually move out, mostly without making his presence known. Only in a fit of jealousy, when she brings

home and kisses another man, does he make some books fly off a shelf, but no sustained haunting ensues. Consequently, C.'s ghost is not attended to, except by another ghost in the house across the street. The first scene between the two ghosts underlines their passivity.³

These ghosts linger without seeming to know why, and cannot be said to haunt. When the neighborhood is eventually demolished, the ghost across the road, standing amid the rubble, sadly notes, "I don't think they're coming," before dematerializing, the sheet falling to the ground. C.'s ghost remains. When high-rise office buildings replace the neighborhood, he tries to terminate his presence by jumping off a ledge, but this only propels him back in time, where he passively looks on as a pioneer family plans to build a house but is killed by Native Americans. Eventually, a house does get built and the ghost witnesses himself and M. moving in. Upon seeing himself, after the accident, return as a ghost (there are now two ghosts of C. in the house), the first ghost finally retrieves a note M. had hidden in a crack in the walls before moving out and reads it, after which he disintegrates.

As viewers, we are not shown what the note says, but given that the disappearance of C.'s ghost is formally identical to that of the ghost across the road – a non-event rather than a momentous one – it seems unlikely that the note gives meaning to his ghostly existence. A likelier interpretation is that the note (perhaps by not referring to C. at all) confirms the futility of the ghost's lingering – the fact that he is not being attended to, not even by time itself, which threatens to endlessly loop his life. In the end, then, rather than the ghost appearing, in line with Derrida's theory, as a powerful force that puts time out of joint, it is the ghost who is defeated by time as an infinite cyclical trap. The film suggests that haunting is not simply what all ghosts do. Rather, its occurrence and force are dependent upon what the ghost can (or cannot) do, and upon a certain quality of attention and attendance on the part of the living. This shifts the focus from the ethico-political choice to be made once a haunting has been established – between trying to exorcize the ghost and learning to live *with* it – to the ethico-political question of which hauntings we, through the distribution of our attention and inattention, make possible or impossible.

Why is such a shift important? Because it opens our eyes to the fact that many phenomena that are said to haunt do not actually do so.

An example can be found in a recent *New York Times* article, where Bryan Stevenson details how the fear of black people and the taste for violent punishment that characterized slavery continue to feed into the American criminal justice system (Stevenson 2019). When, at the end of the article, he notes that 'we must acknowledge the 400 years of injustice that haunt us', this con-

stitutes a paradox, for if this history already haunted American society, it would not still need acknowledgment. Being largely unattended to and violently denounced when it is brought to the fore by a movement like Black Lives Matter, this history and its effects in the present do *not* in fact haunt American or global society in a pervasive manner, and that is the problem. The sentence, then, should really read: ‘we must acknowledge the 400 years of injustice, and attend to the ghosts it has produced, so that they may haunt us.’ Moreover, careful consideration should be given to who the ‘we’ and the ‘ghosts’ in this sentence are. In future, and *for* the future, lingering ghosts like those of slavery must be attended to in a way that enables them to haunt and to keep haunting, so that the trouble is stayed with rather than ignored, dismissed or confined to the past.

Those put in the position of dispossessed ghosts have no choice but to stay with the trouble, but those in more privileged positions, like myself, must choose to do so. Attending to ghosts means facing my blind spots, acknowledging what I, from my position, can afford not to notice or disavow, and listening to and minding other perspectives, also when these perspectives challenge traditions or versions of history I am implicated in and may feel attached to, such as *Zwarte Piet* or the *Gouden Eeuw*. It means experiencing discomfort and losing some of my footing, not just momentarily, but in an enduring way; what it does not entail is any dispossession comparable to that of those made to live *as* ghosts. In the end, as Margriet Schavemaker also suggested in her inaugural lecture about how museums can become more relevant and inclusive, we, whose perspectives have so long been privileged, can afford to attend to ghosts and should take up this responsibility (Schavemaker 2019).

In what follows, I will show how the need to adopt an attitude of attendance is not just central to my work on the spectral metaphor, but also to the practices of cultural analysis and close reading through which I approach what I call the cultural imagination.

Attending to the Cultural Imagination

I define my work as focusing on the cultural imagination – rather than on media-specific representations – for two reasons. First, the term ‘cultural imagination’ recognizes cultural products as ‘more-than-representational’ (Lorimer 2005). As Mikhail Bakhtin (my most constant theoretical touchstone) points out, literature and other art forms do not *reflect* social reality but *refract* it in imaginative ways through particular forms and techniques (Bakhtin

1996). These refractions in turn affect social reality, shaping how it is encountered *as reality*. Paul Ricoeur, moreover, has argued that the imagination operates in two directions towards, on the one hand, ideology, as conservative and integrative, and as masking its imaginariness, and, on the other, utopia, as subversive, inventive and explicitly imaginary. Utopia, as proceeding from ‘no-place’, an eccentric site Ricoeur (1976: 25) likens to a ‘ghost city’, harbors transformative promise, but may also culminate in nostalgic escapism. The cultural imagination, then, is not necessarily progressive, but always more than a simple mirroring of reality. As such, it accommodates what the German artist Hito Steyerl (2019: n. pag.) refers to as post-representation’s ability to highlight the ‘unforeseen things’ and ‘noise’ – or, in other words, ghosts – obscured by representational theories.

Second, with the lines between media increasingly blurred and audiences consuming multiple media in quick succession or even simultaneously, it no longer makes sense to look at literature, film, television, or other media in isolation. Instead, it is imperative to view both the cultural imagination, as the dominant refraction of social reality at any one time locally, nationally or globally, and specific cultural imaginations (which may affirm or challenge this dominant refraction) as produced across different media.

To pinpoint how the cultural imagination refracts social reality, I use the approach of cultural analysis, developed at ASCA, most influentially by Mieke Bal. As honored as I am to be the first Professor of Cultural Analysis at this University, she is the one who paved the way for me and, I hope, many Professors of Cultural Analysis to come. Bal (1999; 2002; 2011; 2012) pioneered cultural analysis as an interdisciplinary approach within the humanities for analyzing cultural objects of all kinds. The aim is not just to understand an object’s meanings and effects, but also to explain how these meanings and effects contribute to the theorization (and hence illumination) of contemporary societal problems. In Bal’s work and that of many of us here who have followed her, analysis unfolds as a dynamic – or, in Bakhtin’s terms, dialogic – encounter between the analyzing subject, the cultural object and the theoretical concept. All three bring something to the analysis and should be changed over its course: the analyzing subject made to question her initial assumptions, the object turned into more than an illustration of the concept, and the concept adapted as a result of the challenges brought to it by the object’s particularities.

Of the five principles of cultural analysis distinguished by Bal – that it should be interdisciplinary, theoretically grounded and oriented, socially relevant, object-centered, and situated in the present⁴ – most important for me have been its interdisciplinarity and object-centeredness. The former was

probably the most distinctive element of cultural analysis in its early years, when crossing disciplinary boundaries, even within the humanities, was still unusual and considered by some unseemly and irresponsible. Today, as it is widely acknowledged that addressing the complex problems the world faces exceeds the scope of any one discipline, a broad interdisciplinarity, extending far beyond the humanities, has become the standard. This does not mean that interdisciplinarity can now be taken for granted; rather, the fact that everyone is doing it makes it all the more important to reflect on how it should be done. One point, emphasized by Bal, that I feel remains crucial is that proper interdisciplinarity does not do away with disciplinary skills and expertise; rather, it takes them and has them engage with skills and expertise developed elsewhere (also outside of academia) in a relationship of mutual attendance.

Broad interdisciplinarity is central to my current project on Rural Imaginations, which is funded by the European Research Council, and on which I am working with a wonderful team of two postdocs – Hanneke Stuit and Emily Ng – and three PhD candidates – Anke Bosma, Lélia Tavakoli Farsooni and Tjalling Valdés Olmos.⁵ The idea for the project came to me when, as vice-director of the Amsterdam Centre for Globalisation Studies (ACGS), I noticed how discussions about globalization privilege its effects on urban contexts. Rural globalization, while undoubtedly real, is mostly ignored, making the rural, in Gayatri Spivak's words, 'the forgotten front of globalization' (2003: 93). This blind spot is, at least in part, due to the way the rural continues to be seen as offering an escape from the world and thus from globalization, in what Ricoeur would call a pathological utopian imagination. Literature, film and television play a crucial role in sustaining this imagination, which is so powerful that even many inhabitants of the rural remain invested in it. The project, a comparative study of five countries (the US, the UK, the Netherlands, China and South Africa), explores how the cultural imagination of the rural in each context – and the global cultural imagination of the rural that runs across them – makes only certain aspects of contemporary rural life visible. It asks why this is and how it affects the rural's political mobilization, for example in relation to Brexit or the election of Donald Trump.

Geographers, sociologists, economists and political scientists in the field of rural studies have produced valuable accounts of what rural globalization looks like on the ground and in the social imagination.⁶ Establishing a productive dialogue with this work is one of our main goals. So far, we have found many connections and complementarities, but there have also been challenges, because of divergent ideas about how research should be conducted and presented, and because concepts are not always used in the same way. Once again, the objective is not a merging of perspectives that would

resolve these tensions, but a staying with the trouble that attends to them. This means taking the findings of these social scientists seriously, but also challenging the view that empirical research *in* the rural is all that matters, and insisting on the value of our close narrative, visual and discursive analyses of specific, widely viewed and read cultural imaginations. At a time when the humanities are commonly dismissed as irrelevant and useless, it is particularly important to stress that, from such analyses, much can be learned about perceptions of the rural and how these perceptions influence its materiality and politics.

The other principle of cultural analysis that has been vital for my work is its object-centeredness. The greatest trap a cultural analyst can fall into is jumping too quickly from the object to the theory, often considered a more serious and more accomplished pursuit. However, although there is no cultural analysis without theorization, there is also no cultural analysis without a sustained attending to the object. The object should be, as Bal has modeled throughout her work, allowed to ‘speak back’ to the analyzing subject’s assumptions and to the theories mobilized in relation to it. We allow an object to ‘speak back’ by attending to the gaps and frictions between what we think it will help us to say when we pick it as our object and what it tells us once we have thoroughly (though never exhaustively) explored it.

Attending carefully to cultural objects can be done in many ways, including through digital methods and ethnographic fieldwork, as ASCA researchers like Richard Rogers, Stefania Milan and Jeroen de Kloet have shown. As someone who, at heart, is a literary scholar, I rely on close reading, which requires, in Jonathan Culler’s words, ‘a respect for the stubbornness of texts’ (2010: 20) – such respect is shown by attending to what Eugenie Brinkema evocatively calls ‘the wild and many fecundities of specificity’ of the text (2014: xv)– those aspects that only fully reveal themselves under careful scrutiny. Close reading has gone through many permutations since the New Critics developed it after the Second World War, shedding its reluctance to consider contexts, materialities and affects, and expanding from a literary method to one suitable for all kinds of texts, including visual ones. What I consider the essence of close reading is, first, its emphasis on a careful, contingent encounter with the text, a modest rather than masterful reading and re-reading that pays detailed attention to specificities of content and form, and, second, its acknowledgment of the text as an endlessly recontextualized and reconfigured site of meaning-making that, much like a ghost, pre-empts instantaneous, complete or definitive understanding.

Although in 2010 Culler could still argue that ‘close reading, like ... apple pie, is something we are all in favor of’ (20), since then it has, as Brinkema

wrote in 2014, become ‘utterly unfashionable’ (xv). Most notably, Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, to legitimate their turn to surface reading, have argued that close reading amounts to a ‘mode of interpretation that assumes that a text’s truest meaning lies in what it does not say, describes textual surfaces as superfluous, and seeks to unmask hidden meanings’ (2009: 1). Despite this being a gross mischaracterization of virtually all forms of close reading, the idea that it is a colonizing practice that empowers the critic at the expense of the text has gained a surprising amount of traction, leading to support not only for surface reading but also for other forms that purport to avoid ‘going deep’, such as descriptive reading, postcritical reading and even *just* reading.⁷

Leaving aside the question of whether it is at all possible to separate a text’s surface from its depths,⁸ given language’s capacity for polysemy and figuration, if close reading is taken to involve a careful attending to the text, which is explicitly invited to trouble the analyst’s expectations, then the text’s manifest content is not disregarded but taken seriously, as a responsive and vertically and horizontally expansive space of meaning-making. Under sustained attention, it expands vertically to reveal what Best and Marcus call ‘hidden’ meanings (which are not really hidden, but traced, accountably, from the surface), and horizontally to reveal more of – and more connections between – what makes up the surface. Strikingly, Best and Marcus use a spectral metaphor to summarize their argument, positing that surface reading is about ‘letting ghosts be ghosts, instead of saying what they are ghosts *of*’ (2009: 13, emphasis in text). This ignores that ghosts, as I have emphasized here, are per definition and quite *literally* the return of something other than what they appear as, meaning that they need to be attended to as traces of something else.

Milk Is Not Just Milk

To demonstrate that it is necessary to go beyond what Best and Marcus call the surface in order to truly attend to the object, I will now do a quick close reading, which is of course a contradiction in terms. It is really only the beginning of a close reading. The object is a cultural imagination of the Dutch rural, a 2013 milk commercial by FrieslandCampina.⁹ The commercial is in Dutch, so I will provide a translation of the voice-over text:

We like to listen to fairy tales
about magical creatures
and potions

but when you drink a glass of milk
will that make you cycle faster
or jump higher?
Milk is just milk
something that no factory in the world can make
but a cow can
That is why farmers work so hard, every day
And thanks to the hard work of the cow and the farmer
right here in the Netherlands
we get something natural – milk
And that milk also goes to people across the whole world
That is not a fairy tale ... but perhaps just as special.

On the surface, this commercial indicates that it is moving away from claiming special powers for milk (as earlier commercials created by the Dutch Dairy Bureau did through the slogan ‘melk, de witte motor’ or ‘milk, the white motor’). Instead, the commercial asserts that ‘milk is just milk’, that it is ‘something natural’ and that, while made in the Netherlands, it is exported globally. This, the voice-over insists, is not a fairy tale. However, if we look and listen more closely, attending to the tensions between what is said and shown, to how things are said and shown, and to what is not said or shown, the message is revealed to be more complicated.

First of all, the final statement, that the story of milk is ‘perhaps just as special’ as a fairy tale, and thus still *like* a fairy tale, ensures that the commercial can present itself as ‘getting real’ about milk, while still imbuing it with a little magic. In this respect, it is significant that the claim that milk will not make you cycle faster or jump higher is never actually denied: the question is asked, but not answered, and by showing a fast cyclist and a high jumper as it is asked, the idea that milk will magically enhance performance is visually maintained.

Second, the commercial emphasizes milk’s naturalness by stating that it cannot be made in a factory. This denies the processing milk undergoes before it reaches consumers and the way farms have become so mechanized that they resemble factories. The large shed with milking equipment and many cows with ear and ankle tags that is shown as the word ‘factory’ is spoken suggests that dairy farms are indeed *like* factories. Showing the shed in black and white, which makes the machines and tags stand out less and gives the images an old-fashioned, nostalgic feel, and contrasting the inside of the shed with color shots of cows in green fields, works against the association between farm and factory, but cannot fully dispel it.

Third, although the commercial seems to acknowledge rural globalization by presenting milk as a global export product, in imagining globalization as a one-way street (of a product made ‘right here in the Netherlands’ going out into the world), FrieslandCampina’s status as an international cooperative, and dairy farming’s reliance on international trade in cows, equipment and feed are obscured. More insidiously, the commercial emphasizes the Dutchness of the milk – transferring the quality of naturalness associated with it to the Dutch nation; it also portrays this nation as exclusively white: all non-white people featured are situated in or associated with other parts of the world.

Fourth, the commercial, despite purporting to tell the ‘real’ story of milk, leaves out crucial parts of this story: milk is labeled ‘natural’ even though dairy cows are bred through artificial insemination and have their milk production stimulated by special feed and constant breeding. Dairy farming is also inaccurately presented as an exclusively male profession, with the only woman pictured on a farm not working but watching a male farmer work.

Much more could be said about this commercial’s affirmation of an idyllic view of the rural that ties it to a patriarchal notion of Dutch national identity, but I hope to have shown that looking beyond the commercial’s stated message at its specificities is necessary to make it speak up, in this case against its own claim that it is not presenting a fairy tale. Attending to the ‘noise’ – to reinvoke Steyerl’s term – that operates across the surface to scramble the commercial’s overt message is not reading something into the text but teasing something out of it in a careful act of criticality. In a world where too many things are taken in at a glance, in a rush, a criticality that takes the time to parse words and refuses to believe that anything, whether ghosts, milk or reading, is ever *just* itself, is arguably the most vital skill we can pass on to our students.

Thanks

According to Bakhtin (1990), we are shaped into subjects by others, who provide an outside perspective on us that we lack. At this point, I want to express my gratitude to some of those who have shaped me.

I thank the Executive Board of the University of Amsterdam, as well as the Faculty of Humanities and its Dean, Fred Weerman, for creating the Chair in Cultural Analysis, and for the confidence placed in me as its first occupant – and Hotze Mulder for expertly guiding me through the appointment process. I am also grateful to previous Deans Frank van Vree and José van Dijck, Fa-

culty research directors Thomas Vaessens and Irene Zwiep, and the Head of the Research Support Office, Elske Gerritsen, for their support and advice. The outstanding Faculty subsidy team cheered me on from one grant application to the next, always making me feel that my efforts were appreciated, even though I failed many times before I succeeded.

At the Department of Literature and Linguistics, Jeannette Schaeffer, Hermien de Boer, Marjolein Valk and Emily de Klerk are constant sources of cheerful encouragement and wisdom. My colleagues in Literary and Cultural Analysis – who have become too numerous to name – impress me every day with their commitment to our students, each other and their research, even though their workloads increase annually and quite a few are in the difficult situation of having no research time and/or no permanent contract.

My Professorship was facilitated by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research's Westerdijk initiative, named for Johanna Westerdijk, the first woman to be appointed professor in the Netherlands, in 1917. In 2018, this initiative added 100 women professors across the country to a number that, outside the humanities and social sciences, remains dispiritingly low. I feel proud and fortunate to be among the Westerdijk laureates and, at the Faculty of Humanities, to have had so many impressive women as role models. First among these was and is Mieke Bal, who, in an act of astonishing intellectual and personal generosity, agreed to supervise my PhD *and* hired me as her personal assistant before ever meeting me in person. For this, for her groundbreaking work in cultural analysis and for everything she has made possible for me, I cannot thank her enough.

From the moment I arrived in Amsterdam, ASCA provided an unparalleled sense of community and intellectual stimulation. I want to thank Eloe Kingma and Jantine van Gogh, who are ASCA's heart and soul, for always having their door open and for making me laugh even on the toughest days. From working closely with Patricia Pisters, I learned what it means to be a committed and compassionate leader. I am extremely honored to have followed in Patricia's footsteps as ASCA's academic director, albeit in less fashionable shoes. I also owe a big thank you to Patricia's predecessor, Christoph Lindner, whose professionalism I aspire to, and who pushed me to apply for a position as Associate Professor when I hesitated because I did not fulfill 100% of the criteria. Being ASCA director as ASCA celebrates its 25th anniversary is a dream come true and what makes it even better is to share the responsibility with the new vice-director, Jaap Kooijman, fellow-pop culture enthusiast and the best of all the wonderful office mates I've had over the years.

While ASCA will always be my most important intellectual home, the Amsterdam Center for Globalization Studies is also very special to me. In parti-

cular, I want to thank its founder and director, Jeroen de Kloet, for taking me on as vice-director (on the basis of the application Christoph encouraged me to send), for making running the center together an enormously rewarding yet remarkably relaxed experience, and for pursuing me with dancing monkeys on WeChat to make me submit my grant proposal one last time when I was more than ready to give up.

I am extremely proud of all my former and current PhD candidates, and have learned a lot from their unwavering passion for their projects, their resilience in the face of ever-increasing pressure and uncertainty, and their determination to build successful careers and happy lives inside or outside of academia. The BA and MA students I have had the privilege to teach I thank for keeping me on my toes by asking unexpected questions and for indulging my attempts to shoehorn Bakhtin into every single course.

I owe an enormous debt to Carolyn Ayers, who, at the University of Groningen, infected me with the Bakhtin bug, probably for life, and to Peter Hitchcock, whose theoretically sophisticated, witty readings of everything from postcolonial literature to coffee and Nike shoes I find infinitely inspiring. Another important influence in Groningen was Barend van Heusden, who sparked my interest in literary and cultural theory, and, by inviting me to sit on the Literary Studies program committee, made me realize that I would rather try to improve academia from within than complain from the sidelines (which does not mean I would not be willing to go on strike to protest the current government's marginalization of the humanities and social sciences).

My friends – Isabel, Maaïke, Gebke and Marnix, who have known me longest, and Anette, Astrid, Carolyn, Cornelia, Eliza, Hanneke, Jaap, Jeroen, Joost, Laura, María, Murat, Silke and many others – have sustained me through good and bad times: having so many of you here is a true privilege.

I am grateful to my parents for letting me spend most of my first eighteen years in my room reading and for sponsoring this snazzy gown. My brother Jeroen I miss today even more than every other day.

Finally, I want to address Naj, my husband, who, because of all the time I spend away from our home in Geneva and working while I am there, probably quite often feels as though he lives with a ghost: I hope you know that without your love, patience, support and sense of humor I would never have made it this far.

Ik heb gezegd.

Notes

1. See, for example, Bergland 2000; Dillon 2012; Holland 2000; Richardson 2003; Schwab 2010; Young 2006.
2. On the spectrality of finance capitalism and its imaginary, see Appadurai 2000; Meissner 2017; Vogl 2014. On haunted data, see Blackman 2019.
3. This scene from *A Ghost Story* can be watched at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NX9T3z6JypQ>.
4. For Bal's explanation of the five principles of cultural analysis, see <https://vimeo.com/165822613>.
5. For more information, see the project website: <http://ruralimagination.wordpress.com>.
6. See, for example, Cloke, Marsden and Mooney 2006; Shucksmith and Brown 2016; Woods 2011.
7. See, for example, Felski 2015; 2017, Love 2010; 2013, and Marcus, Love and Best 2016.
8. For a trenchant Marxist critique of surface reading that questions any absolute distinction of surface and depth, see Baskin 2015.
9. The commercial can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Td38TkeEMwA>.

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