

Preface: Ghosts – or the (Nearly) Invisible

Ghost stories are inevitably involved with the history of the invisible and the question as to how this can be represented. When David Garrett, the great 18th-century actor, tried to visualise the invisible ghost of Hamlet's father, he had to resort to a technological gimmick, the mechanical wig that would rise on command – no ghost, but hair standing on end. The audience could not see a ghost, but only its effect: *horripilation*, as the terminology goes. The ghost had been transferred on to the living human being. That invisible beings might enter the spectators is a deep fear undermining human identity at its core. It is also the source of horror in many ghost and vampire stories.

From prehistory to this day, we have been haunted by our memories, the past itself, by inklings of the future, by events playing outside our lives and by ourselves. Hence the lure of ghost stories throughout history and presumably prehistory. Science has been a great destroyer of myth and superstition, but at the same time it has created new black boxes which we are filling with our ghostly imagination. No wonder then that the ghost story really takes off on the eve of the Scientific Revolution and industrialisation. Daniel Defoe, among his many projects, also wrote what was called the first modern ghost story (“The Apparition of Mrs Veal”, 1706). The Romantic era welcomed the supernatural as an antidote to rationalism and mechanisation, its poetry being full of somnambulistic experiences, visual and auditory dream sequences and revelations of natural magic. But it is the Victorians who turned the ghost story into a commodity for the newly established magazine culture. Their greatest representatives, from Dickens to Charlotte Brontë, did not disdain the genre. Others followed in their wake: Amelia Edwards, Edith Nesbit, Arthur Conan Doyle or Robert Louis Stevenson. There was a market and needs that had to be served – a mutually successful enterprise. The ghost story was even taken up by great non-sensational writers such as Henry James or Virginia Woolf. Another James, Montague Rhode James, became what was probably the most important ghost story writer of the early 20th century. His stories are learned and wicked, disturbing and cosy at the same time. All this faded away with the Great War. Haunting took another shape – spiritualism, thus reviving a mid-Victorian fashion. Communicating with the dead from battlefields around the world became a great hope and obsession. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle took up this duty as he did so many others – to establish contacts between the living and the dead.

The turn of the century was a period when the new media of photography, film and phonograph/gramophone engaged with kingdom come. Even Thomas Alva

Edison, the greatest inventor of his time, had turned to the occult possibilities of technology. Ghosts appeared in early films by Georges Méliès and the magician Harry Houdini documented his tricks on film. The film, as film scholars have found out, was the perfect medium to manifest the disappearance and dissolution of self and the dematerialisation of the body. X-Rays were further proof of the loss of material solidity. Science and technology were fulfilling a theatrical prophecy made by Prospero in *The Tempest*:

These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits, and
Are melted into air, into thin air. (Act 4, Scene 1)

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels turned this into a formula in *The Communist Manifesto*: “All that is solid melts into air.” And even their programme for a revolution based on science and reason has the trappings of a ghost story:

A spectre is haunting Europe — the spectre of communism. All the powers of old Europe have entered into a holy alliance to exorcise this spectre: Pope and Tsar, Metternich and Guizot, French Radicals and German police-spies.

In the 21st century, the ghost has changed political sides (as it so often does, whimsy as it is), when Arundhati Roy wrote her essay “Capitalism: A Ghost Story” (2015), which reminds us again of Marx who called capitalism a form of vampirism.

All this goes to show that the discourse on ghosts and haunted sites of memory is still very vital, even after 200.000 years of human ghost hunting.

In May 2015, the English Department of Leipzig University in collaboration with the Inklings Society organised a conference on “Ghosts, or the (Nearly) Invisible”. The proposals came from around the world and we had to split the proceedings eventually. Many of the German language talks went into *Inklings Yearbook* 33 (2016), edited by Dieter Petzold. In our selection, we concentrate on historical pieces, on media and geography. Contributions thus range from essays on the Middle Ages to Oscar Wilde, Neil Gaiman and the media on the one hand, while on the other we are looking at particular places such as the Antarctic with its haunting whiteness, at houses in poetry or Haitian practices. Russia and China are also represented. All this will hopefully provide a broad view over the presence of ghostliness, and inspire further reflection, for as Derrida said: “I believe that ghosts are part of the future.”

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