WEST COAST LINE

writing • images • criticism

ghostworks

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GHOSTWORKS

edited by Jodey Castricano

THE GHOST IN THE MECHANISM: VIRTUAL BODIES, MECHANICAL GHOSTS, AND CRASH-TEST DUMMIES

Helen Burgess

> Vince and Larry, those well-known crash-test dummies, are hanging it up. Sponsored by the US Department of Transportation, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, the Advertising Council, law enforcement and other safety-conscious affiliations, Vince and Larry have been deemed "too nice" to convince people they must wear seat belts ... The Advertising Council will be producing ads that shock the viewer – scenes of crashes, injuries, fatalities. Tell it like it is seems to be the motto. *West Virginia AAA Motorist* 7(2) (March/April 1999)

It's my belief that ghosts have some work to do, and it's about time they wiped off their ectoplasmic hands and got on with it. Some days it seems we're surrounded by ghosts – whether of the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* variety or the tame ghosts that go bump in the night or – most scarily now – the ghosts that remain from our deeds of the last century: thalidomide babies, holocaust survivors (fewer and fewer), agent Orange and Gulf War Syndrome victims, the doubling and doubling again of the world's population.

One of the things I've been struggling with, really ever since I read Jean Baudrillard's *Simulations,* is the idea of the postmodern immaterial. In traditional analysis, it's assumed that the immaterial haunts the material: ghosts who haunt houses/people/books. Indeed, the whole long history of binary modes of philosophy and religion – the body as the material house for an immaterial spirit/soul, mind-body dualism, female "material" and male "mind," etc. – is based on the idea that the material is base and unimportant next to the immaterial; that materiality is "formed" by the immaterial. Even many cultural constructionists, while trying their

hardest to escape and even critique this dualism, can end up by insisting that the body is ultimately formed by something supposedly immaterial, i.e., "discourse," "patriarchy," etc. Baudrillard goes one step further, and claims that we've disappeared into the immaterial – everything is a simulation of something else immaterial; we're all ghosts of ghosts of ghosts. But what happened to bodies? Into this philosophical gumbo, we can throw both phenomenology and corporeal feminism, try to show how the material forces its way onto the scene as constitutive of the immaterial. So can we usefully employ the ghost as a way of discussing how future and past, body and "spirit" get split up? How about using ghosts as an analytical tool – discussing how they work, how theorists talk about them, what their drawbacks are, whether they have a political function?

To answer these questions, let's take a look at two versions of the ghost that are representative of two of the more currently powerful discourses of western philosophy: Slavoj Žižek's explication of the Lacanian psychoanalytical notion of "fantasy" in *The Plague of Fantasies*, and Jacques Derrida's marxist-inflected notion of the "spectre." In particular, I want to concentrate on the way in which each of these models problematize the coding of the relationship between the immaterial (fantasy, virtualization) and the material (the machine, the body), by using the trope of a ghostly haunting. It is my suggestion that Derrida ends up on the side of the virtual body, while Žižek ends up on the side of the mechanical ghost. I would argue that these categories are very different. The reason is – rather oddly, perhaps, in this anti-ethical philosophical climate – an ethical one. Derrida's insistence on "talking" with (or perhaps listening to) the ghost, whether it be present or absent, past or future, seems a more *ethical* move in a virtual, wired-up world built out of fleeting images and forgettings than Žižek's insistence that we are always already come undone, and there is nothing to be done except to accept the split within us and hope for the best. As a focusing point, I've chosen to use an uncanny object we see every day on the television, a "haunted" object that stands in for a person in relation to death – the crash-test dummy. Both Derridean and Žižek's analysis of such mechanical bodies work well in explaining what's at stake when talking about presence and absence in the face of the machine.

FOND FAREWELL — Vince and Larry, crash-test dummies famous for urging Americans to wear seat belts, recently paid a final visit to AAA before they retired or, rather, "were retired" by the national coalition of safety organizations that conceived them. Future promotional efforts about seat belt safety are expected to be more graphic, showing collisions and their victims.

Derridean Virtual Bodies

Derrida's work on the ghosts of Marx and the spectre of communism is a response to Fukuyama's claim that we are "at the end of history" with the "defeat" of communism. Derrida's claim is that, far from living in a world at the end of history and ideology, now more than ever we need to listen to a "spirit of Marxism" which can tell us how to move forward in a period where "time is out of joint": where time and space are becoming increasingly virtualized by the "techno-tele-media."

The key to Derrida's argument is his return to Hamlet's cry that "time is out of joint": ghosts remind us of how time can jump forward and backward; ghosts can point to the past or the future with accusing fingers. For Derrida, the spectre is always a *revenant*, the ghost that comes back no matter how hard we try to exorcise it. Derrida here pays close attention to the meaning of the words "conjure" and "exorcise" in this context: one must first call up the ghost in order to exorcise it, but it is this act of calling up that forms the ghost in the first place.

Derrida thus claims that the primary characteristic of the spectre is its always and already *returning* – it has no originary "first haunting" because that haunting is always a reappearance of the person who once lived. At the same time, though, the ghost exists because "time is out of joint": the ghost is not congruous with the person, because the person was haunted (not congruous with his/herself) to begin with. The ghost, thus, is constitutive, since it has no originary moment of haunting. The ghost, in other words, calls us to remember the person alive, and at the same time points to a reappearance of that person under a new sign, a return from the dead (or to the dead) that is the mark of the ghost. There is no thing, no person, without a ghost – without multiple ghosts.

In discussing the materiality of the spectral form, the commodity fetish, Derrida first describes how the object becomes, for Marx, haunted at the moment of its commodification:

> the table has feet, the table has a head, its body comes alive, it erects its whole self like an institution, it stands up and addresses itself to others, first of all to other commodities, its fellow beings in phantomality ... it has become a kind of headstrong, pigheaded, obstinate animal that, standing, faces other commodities. Facing up to the others, before the others, its fellows, here then is the apparition of a strange creature: at the same time Life, Thing, Beast, Object, Commodity, Automaton – in a word, specter ... The wood comes alive and is peopled with spirits. (151-52)

And yet, at the same time, Derrida argues that Marx does not push this process far enough. He suggests that even before its entry into the market, the object is not pure use-value, but is already haunted by its future status as a commodity. There is no such thing as use-value unless it is a back-formation from exchange value; thus commodification is always already constitutive of the thing; the ghost and the thing are inseparable. What is clear, though, is that as money becomes less and less material (credit, stock residuals), it becomes more and more powerful, more and more "spectral." Derrida calls this the virtualization of time and space, arguing that

> It obliges us more than ever to think the virtualization of space and time, the possibility of virtual events whose movement and speed prohibit us more than ever ... from opposing presence to its representation, "real time" to "deferrred time," effectivity to its simulacrum, the living to the non-living, in short, the living to the living-dead of its ghosts. (169)

However, Derrida's take on our increasing virtualization is not that we're being somehow sucked our of our bodies into some realm of pure simulation, but that it more subtly marks a different way (notably, in terms of speed and time) in which we have commerce with our ghosts and each other. It seems to me that the "techno-tele-media" is more interesting for Derrida because of the speed at which it operates than because it is somehow disembodying us. Speed and time become inextricably linked, so that Derrida seems to be asking, what happens when our lives are so speeded up that past, present, and future start to mesh together, when all things seem to be happening at once? The answer seems to be, of course, that "time is out of joint": we have more ghosts to deal with, more memory, more futures to consider, more voices to reckon with.

Derrida's spectre is interesting because even though it haunts, it's not necessarily immaterial. He speaks of the spectre as having a kind of weird (discursive) embodiment, a "tangible intangibility of a proper body without flesh" (7) – of a more abstract concept like "spirit," arguing that a spectre must necessarily be embodied in order to make any sense (it must, after all, have a mouth to speak, or a finger to point). Just as with the thing-as-commodity, Derrida is able to suggest implicitly that the body of the spectre and the haunted body are not so different, and certainly in no way separable from "subjectivity":

> Persons are personified by letting themselves be haunted by the very effect of objective haunting, so to speak, that they produce by inhabiting the thing. Persons (guardians or possessors of the thing) are haunted in return, and constitutively, by the haunting they produce in the thing by lodging there their speech and their will like inhabitants. (158)

The spectre (and the subject) is thus both body and not-body, constituting at the same time as it appears to abstract.

The "retiree" crash-test dummies fall into this category: they have been retired because they resemble the human body closely enough to warrant a farewell party (see the image of the dummies "waving goodbye"), but they are not sufficiently "real" enough to continue their job of warning off motorists. Certainly "real" human bodies cannot be used, meaning another kind of fake/virtual/actor will instead take the dummies' place as the ghost of every motorist driving home in rush hour late Friday night. There is no such thing as a "thing" (including a body) without its spectral form; all things are haunted by ghosts that cannot be removed or exorcised because the "thing" would no longer be what it is. The "spirit of marxism" cannot be remembered without the ghost of Marx. This may be a virtual body, but its virtuality is undeniably fleshy.

Žižek's Mechanical Ghosts

If Derrida's version of the ghost is that of a paradoxically embodied voice "out of joint" in time and space, Žižek's model is that of the Lacanian "barred subject" – a subject *structurally* "out of joint." The Lacanian model supposes a subject structured around an irrepresentable kernel ("the Real") to which it cannot have access, instead accessing "reality" through the work of "fantasy" – not a sustained illusion, but the way through which we structure reality. Žižek's claim, like Derrida's, is that now more than ever we find ourselves in a world of increasing virtualization. For Žižek, we are surrounded by a "plague of fantasies" – pseudo-concrete images that cover over the mounting abstractions at work in our lives. However, the very way in which we structure our reality through the work of fantasy suggests that fantasy and materiality are mutually constitutive. Žižek argues that "the materialization of ideology in external materiality reveals inherent antagonisms which the explicit formulation of ideology cannot afford to acknowledge" (4) – in other words, our

material cultural productions (from television ads to our very subjectivity) reveal the antagonism underlying ideology. In this model, fantasy is not only a social mechanism for covering over the irrepresentability/horror of the Real, but also in some senses creates or points to that horror. So, in opposition to the usual claim that fantasy creates a narrative which covers over, makes a whole of existence, Žižek is arguing that fantasy consistently comes undone, falls apart – "the truth is out there," embedded *materially*, right alongside the fantasy, not hidden.

For my purposes, I'm most interested in Žižek's analysis of two mirror-image ways in which the fantasy comes undone: what he calls "the ghost in the machine" and the "machine in the ghost." Žižek argues that the categories we know as "life" and "death" are supplemented/underpinned by two other categories: the horror of the machine in the ghost and the ghost in the machine, between which the "death drive" is located. These two categories Žižek sees as undermining the difference between life and death, the material and the immaterial, in such a way that we are forced to confront the horror that we might be both alive and dead at the same time.

"The machine in the ghost" is the discovery that what appears to be alive is actually dead – a doll made to look like a living human, a machine of gears that sits in a technological graveyard: "this is the ultimate horror: not the proverbial ghost in the machine but the machine in the ghost: there is *no* plotting agent behind it, the machine just runs by itself, as a blind contingent device" (40). Žižek ties this image to language – the dead symbolic order which behaves as if it's alive but ultimately is a cold machine. Conversely, "the ghost in the machine" is the ghastly supplement of flesh, the zombie body, the "acephalous" slime, life where there should be none – "the monstrous Life-substance that persists in the Real outside the symbolic" (89). What Freud and Lacan called the "death drive" exists between these two machine deaths – "death in the symbolic and death in the Real" (89). Life and death thus become confused, sitting supplemented by the "symbolic parasitic machine" or "blind contingent device" and the living dead.

If these categories seem to have little to do with Derrida's more marxist analysis of the virtualization of subjectivity and history, they start to overlap in Žižek's analysis of the commodity fetish. While Derrida talks of the fetish as an object which starts to move (i.e., is endowed with life in the constitutive moment of haunting), Žižek is able to show how this haunting consists of two opposing tendencies between life and death in "the spectralization of the fetish." In these increasingly virtualized times, "capital functions as the sublime irrepresentable Thing, present only in its effects, in contrast to a commodity, a particular material object which miraculously 'comes to life,' starts to move as if endowed with an invisible spirit" (103). The horror of virtualized capital, as Žižek sees it, is not that it might be the machine in the ghost or the ghost in the machine, but that it might be trying to approximate or obliterate the irrepresentable Real, and in doing so might obliterate the space of fantasy altogether.

These two versions of haunting – the spectre and the fantasy – thus both have as their concern the increasing virtualization of the world, the coming of the "plague of fantasies." However, their responses, as well as their models, differ quite widely. What's most noticeable for me between these two versions of the ghost (Lacanian and Derridean) is the disjunction between their notions of history. Derrida's overarching political purpose – to call up, if you will, the spectres of Marx – is to remind us of voices from the past (marxist, Hegelian, phenomenological) which still haunt us today, not to mention the voices of the billions of ghosts clamouring for our attention from the future – the ghosts of generations to come who will have to abide by the decisions we make today. Žižek, on the other hand, spends his time explaining "why jouissance is not historical" (for example), arguing that the creation of fantasy, the Real, the death drive, and the repressed horror of the machine in the ghost and the ghost in the machine is *structural*: history (even Derrida's "time-out-of-joint" version) is not a primary force in the constitution of the Lacanian barred subject. In terms of a political injunction to action, then, these differing notions of history lead to quite different conclusions. Derrida is concerned with "justice" without necessary presence. He claims that we

should take responsibility or our ghosts (past, present, and future) as well. "No justice ... seems possible or thinkable without the principle of some *responsibility*, beyond all living present, within that which disjoins the living present, before the ghosts of those who are not yet born or who are already dead" (xix).

The split in time is what allows us to imagine our effects on people in other times; Derrida is thus concerned with the responsibility we hold towards our fellow humans, both past and future. Žižek, on the other hand, is concerned with a structural (or anti-structural) political move: a "traversal of fantasy" which does not lead to the death drive through either the machine in the ghost or the ghost in the machine. Instead, he suggests that we must renounce the (false) opening structured for us by fantasy: "the crucial condition for breaking the chains of servitude is thus to 'traverse the fantasy' which structures our *jouissance* [the enjoyment we experience in the act of transgression or excision of fantasy] in a way which keeps us attached to the master – makes us accept the framework of the social relationship of domination" (48). In other words, don't take the way out structured for you; instead, be aware and take advantage of the antagonism/contradiction upon which each fantasy is based.

In terms of analytical tools, it seems like I'm left with a somewhat abstract field in which to play: "speak to the ghost" or "traverse the fantasy." But both Derrida and Žižek's models of spectrality and fantasy seem to add quite a lot of value to an analysis of the relationship between materiality (especially "the technological") and immateriality. First, with reference to Derrida, I can say that having recourse to the ghost as an analytical tool gives me insight into the way technologies are constituted "spectrally" – they're always haunted by something else. In terms of the technologies I've chosen to study (crash-test dummy, computer), it seems to me there is always a body lurking in the background somewhere, in the past or future. Machines, for example, are usually said to be built to extend the body in some mode; they are modelled on the body – from devices as simple as levers to the complex technologies of visualization. This grand-scale generalization, though, has led me to consider something more interesting – the notion that machines and technologies,

even ones as immaterial as computers, are paradoxically "haunted" by bodies. Bodies become *dis*-incorporated in the machine – ghosts who inhabit our technologies and which we repress every day in our haste to get right out of that pesky bit of flesh that constitutes us. Thus, in Derrida's world "the ghost in the machine" is not an insubstantial spirit occupying a material machine, but the thing which makes the machine what it is – a constitutive, material-immaterial haunting. The machine speaks to us about the bodies we are trying so hard to replace, turn off, repress, forget. The ghost in the machine comes back to haunt us, not as a spirit but as a reminder of our own corporeality.

Similarly, Žižek's useful distinction between "the machine in the ghost" and "the ghost in the machine" allows me to discuss just what is going on in our cultural responses to technology. As an example, consider the crash-test dummy: here we have an object whose sole purpose is to be put into cars and then smashed up (though preferably not too much). However at the same time, these objects act as weird road-crash fetishes, voodoo dolls of death: they're dressed up, given names, have "family" photos taken, even "speak" to us in commercial advertising. This "haunted" object contains elements of both the machine in the ghost and the ghost in the machine. First, the cultural images we have of the crash-test dummy call for it to look and behave as much like a human (including speech) as possible. But if we look at it closely, we find that it's dumb and mechanical. This "machine in the ghost" suggests something quite horrifying that we're not really prepared to admit – what if we are really nothing more than crash-test dummies ourselves, "blind contingent devices" whose sole purpose is to be smashed up in high-speed collisions? Second, we're quite aware that these bodies are made to be as flesh-like as possible. But we also know that the damage sustained to a crash-test dummy is reparable – just take them to the shop for a bit of panel-beating. While the damage to a dummy is supposed to mimic damage done to a human, most of the ways we measure that damage is through pressure sensors and paint explosions to mimic bruises: whole-body trauma of the kind that humans sustain in car crashes is a fragile flesh-thing, a response of the unrepresentable Life-thing to unbearable trauma. And finally, in between these

ghosts and machines, we have the horrifying space of the death-drive, here quite compellingly trapped in the plastic body literally "driven" to its death: so, for Žižek, "it is only here, where its functioning is suspended, that we fully become aware of the ruthless technological drive which determines our lives" (44). This, for Žižek, is the horror encapsulated in Heidegger's *Gestell* ("enframing") – the instrumentality of technology turned back on humanity.

Both Žižek and Derrida's use of the ghost thus seem to be useful in attempting a discussion of the imaginary constitution of technology. But I think it's also important not to use the two together without a recognition of the differences that their approaches will inevitably have. Most importantly, Derrida's analysis of a "time out of joint" and Žižek's psychic space-out-of-joint point to a fundamental disagreement in the status of (and therefore any responsibility towards) an other: so, for Žižek, "traversal of the fantasy ... means that we renounce every opening, every belief in the messianic Otherness – here late Lacan parts with the 'deconstructionist' notion of spectrality, with the Derridean-Levinasian problematic of the ontological crack or dislocation ('out-of-joint'), with the notion of the universe as not-yet-fully ontologically constituted" (31). For me, this means that adopting a Lacanian tool of analysis might involve abandoning the notion of an other to whom one has a responsibility, a step I'm not quite sure I'm willing to take.

My interest in the crash-test dummy and other such uncanny objects is about ghosts and machines, material and immaterial, the spectres of past and future which try to communicate to us in texts and things. But it's also my way of trying to follow Derrida's ethical move. In embarking on a cultural history of an uncanny object I'm trying to talk with, listen to, and learn from ghosts, to

> learn to live by learning not how to make conversation with the ghost but how to talk with him, with her, how to let them speak or how to give them back speech, even if it is in oneself, in the other, in the other in oneself: they are always *there*, specters, even if they do not exist, even if they are no longer, even if they are not yet. (176)

For me (like, I suspect, most people in this profession), this work amounts to therapy. Maybe it's my way of trying to exorcise a bunch of other ghosts I'm not really aware of – maybe a sense of displacement in a country that spends all its time trying to prevent its revenants from coming back. An Australian friend of mine once commented that what he thought was so strange about America was that it had no ghosts – that it had escaped the close horrors of the European wars (it battled them, of course, far from home) and reconstruction, and was intent on using technology and Ricki Lake to stay as free of them as possible. I suspect though, that America is haunted by the spectres people brought with them from those other places ("the old country"), and that the most frequently forgotten ghost, that of the land itself, is waiting to voice its dismay. America is the land of the future, the land people run to forget their pasts, but new ghosts are returning back to us from that future, and reporting that all is not well in spectral America. It's our responsibility to listen very carefully.

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