

Excerpt from "Spectres of Benjamin," *Textual Practice* 19 (4) 2005

This is a lengthy essay composed of many parts that form an interlocution between Jacques Derrida's book *Spectres of Marx* and the work of Walter Benjamin, which is a sort of phantom limb of the book. This section sets up context for what follows. Some punctuation didn't carry over through PDF; for example, accents.

Spectres of Marx

Recall that central to Derrida's account of the spectre is the observation that spirits from the past return (are conjured up or remembered) when people are of the view that the world around them is 'out of joint' (disadjusted, inoperable, malfunctioning). That was the situation in the 1930s when Benjamin was living in Paris and may well explain the importance of phantasmagoria in the second expose' of the *Arcades* in 1939. However, for Derrida the privileged example is the Shakespearean stage convention of spectres coming to haunt people in a world gone horribly awry due to monstrous acts that pervert and violate the great chain of being. This commonplace is grafted on to Heidegger's notion of *Unfug* (aka Derridean differance) in order to maintain that the spectre is the trace of something so seriously and monstrously out of order that it perturbs this place of disorder long after the time of derangement. In other words, the spectre is the trace of a bewitched spot that is experienced as *Unheimlich*, as a place one can no longer call home, because something 'other', which is very inhospitable and repulsive, has appropriated and usurped it, even if this other is known in advance as something quite familiar.

If one reads *Specters of Marx* in light of a Radio Canada broadcast of 1983 in which Derrida participated with Jean-Luc Nancy, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Claude Levesque, one can see an important connection between Heidegger and Marx. Derrida extemporizes that the spectre, according to Heidegger, is technology, because its effect is to disadjust us with respect to our environment. In other words, technology mediates the relation between body and world in ways that estrange us from ourselves and the places in which we dwell. Since Derrida does not give specific examples, let us consider the contemporary American homeowner who accidentally sets off the electronic house alarm. Should the police come knocking it would be clear that the device has become the social subject, while the homeowner has been subordinated, by processes out of his or her control, to helpless bystander. The experience would be uncanny because it would seem that an alien will or presence (that of the electronic sentinel as Hausfreund) has been installed in the house that not only takes the place of the owners but reports them as intruders – as outsiders and alien beings. The issue is not whether this often happens but rather that the technology carries this as a constant threat and makes the home environment inhospitable and *Unheimlich*.

As Derrida indicates, the spectre is the mechanical proxy that reverses (disadjusts) the hierarchy wherein the social subject dominates (owns, controls, authorizes) the mechanical apparatuses that are allowed to substitute for it, as if people were suddenly being dictated to by

their machines. This is a view, of course, that has apocalyptic dimensions in films such as *Terminator* and *Blade Runner* in which the uncanny turns into the monstrous (that which because it is inhuman and spectral [robots are virtual spectral entities] has no limit or boundaries). However, back in the 1940s, Heidegger had already intuited this sort of monstrosity by way of Ernst Junger's writings and identified it with unencumbered exploitation of the life-world as an end in itself alongside which human beings could only think of themselves as puny bystanders.

Marx's thinking is not altogether so far from Heidegger's in that Marx saw capitalism as essentially a form of unencumbered exploitation of the life-world, which is to say, as a technology of making capital whose spectre estranges us from ourselves. In that sense we could say that both Marx and Heidegger were thinking through the problem of nihilism. (What Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifesto* called the 'uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions' by means of the constant revolutionizing of production is not unrelated to what Heidegger meant by technology.) Marx himself clearly understood how the gadget – or more precisely, the commodity – upstages its owner by taking on a life of its own even to the point of dictating terms to the owner (protect me, maintain me, insure me and so on). Marx wanted to exorcise the commodity-spectre because he saw it as a perverted mystification of the object wherein a social relation is not only expressed but replaced by an object relation – that relation being the monstrous, spectral double of the human relation. Like Heidegger, Marx notices that things are alienating once they take our place as social subjects and turn us into bystanders. Adam Smith's phantasmic hand of the market takes priority over the interests of whole segments of society because there are those who treat this spectre as if it were the spirit of an independent thing-agency with its own wilful nature that has to take priority over everything else because this mysterious spirit-hand seems to be in the role of a dictator, no matter how disastrous (or disadjusted) the economic situation.

Such concerns touch on the perversion of right order. By way of Heidegger's notion of *Unfug*, read retroactively into Shakespeare, Derrida manages an allegory of reading which suggests that communism – in its appearance of spectre that haunts Europe – is spooking everyone, because it is the spectral political consequence of history being out of kilter. As we know from Marx and Engels, it is the bourgeoisie that has rendered (concrete) social relations asunder for the sake of capital accumulation (which is speculative and spectral). Already in Shakespeare, the apparition of Hamlet's dead father marks the rendering asunder of a bond that is socio-ontological and that therefore impacts adversely upon the order of the great chain of being, symptomized by the apparition of spectres, the madness of young lovers, the usurpation of kings and the perversion of queens. The appearance of spectres therefore indicates that the socioontological order is falling apart, something which is experienced in terms of supernatural terror.

Because Marx lived in a time when the forces of capitalist exploitation

were ripping traditional social relations apart, the question of aristocratic succession was no longer a defining moment, socio-ontologically, whereas class antagonisms between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, on the one hand, and between the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy, on the other hand, managed to make all social subjects feel as if they were living in a potentially unstable world, if not one that actually was unstable (conflicted). Communism, of course, is itself a throwback to models of sociality that may be considered precapitalist and prearistocratic – that is, communal societies – though communism is also clearly thought to be postcapitalist. Hence communism may be said to instantiate a disadjustment of history or time.

Benjamin chronicles experiences of social, economic and political instability in his *Arcades* by means of selecting hundreds of quotations in order to show the extent to which the experiences of adjustment/disadjustment were in collision for various Parisians – Baudelaire, among them – a collision which gave rise to what Benjamin called phantasmagoria. ‘Modernity has its antiquity, like a nightmare that has come to it in its sleep’ [J82a4].⁴ In Baudelaire’s women: ‘the fetishistic and the seraphic elements never coincide’ [J64,1]. ‘To the flâneur, his city is. . . no longer native ground. It represents for him a theatrical display, an arena’ [J66a6]. For Marx and Engels, however, the out-of-kilter nature of society was considered far more extreme, so that it was not surprising to them that a spectre of revolutionary communism (of a revolutionary communitarianism characterized by egalitarianism and fraternity and not rapacious cutthroat capitalism) might haunt the guilty conscience of those who had the capacity to reflect on what was occurring under their auspice. However, fearing the accusation and retaliation of such a spectre of revolution and rectitude, Marx and Engels realized that the bourgeoisie would try to exorcise communism, much as King Hamlet’s usurpers tried to exorcise his ghost: by means of delegitimation (disguised as generosity and largesse), denial (repudiation) and, in the last instance, sculduggery (execution).

Derrida wonders why Marx appears to have been so influenced by the rhetoric of spectres in Shakespeare’s plays, given how odd it is to think that the *techné* of literary spectres should turn up at all in political and economic texts written by someone as anti-metaphysical (anti-spiritual, anti-religious, anti-superstitious) as Marx was. Moreover, Derrida’s interpretations raise the concern that in Marx a spectral rhetoricity from the past is at times taking Marxism over by way of proxy and making Marx and Engels appear as if they were mediums. Apparently, spectres of terror from the French Revolution were animating communism by means of a phantasmic visitation, as if Marx and Engels had conjured them up. And yet this merely exaggerates and theatricalizes what is merely the social memory of something in the past that one fears could or has come back in the present. This memory is then subjected to the paranoia that something from the past has come back in the present as an agency that does not reveal itself, but makes its presence known by disquieting everyone’s peace of mind. In arrogating the power of this spectral force for themselves, Marx and Engels proclaim, ‘A specter is haunting Europe.’ But is that spectre theirs to control?

In a sense, that was Adorno's problem with respect to what he called Benjamin's bewitched spot as well. Was it his to control? Of course, if there was this bewitched spot in Benjamin's thinking, should it not have occurred to Adorno that Benjamin may well have inherited it from Marx and Engels? If Benjamin did, we ourselves might ask whether such a bewitched spot is a general effect of Marxist writing – a trace, aura or spectre – that is not a blind spot, as Adorno imagined, but a necessary and inevitable product if not production of Marxism, however supplementary this may appear. We may also ask if it was not because the nineteenth-century ground of history was so disadjusted (to the point of revolution) that Marxism is necessarily responding to it in this spectral way, given that when revolutions occur, ghosts appear.

There is an argument to be made that in Benjamin's *Arcades* the quotations are themselves disadjusted, something which would account for the various debates around what he meant in, say, Convoluted N, which advances a number of theoretical constructions. It's also not surprising that the text is preoccupied with phantasmagoria, given that the quotations are largely indexical of the disadjusted material conditions of nineteenth-century Paris. Although the disorder was not immediately apparent to citizens who uncritically presumed Paris to be a coherent life-world, it did imperceptibly conjure up spectres from the past and had the effect of spectralizing people in the present by making them resemble, via market forces, some sort of capitalist social subject that is the effect of fashion's intersection with ideology. Benjamin's citations, of course, showed that individual perceptions of the Parisian life-world revealed considerable disadjustment, so much so that the city dweller felt *Unheimlich* in what is, after all, his or her Heimat. Yet nineteenth-century Paris, as Baudelaire revealed, was also a network of correspondences or alliances, many of them predicated upon phantasy and phantasmagoria. Benjamin's quotation of de Maistre's *Les Soirees de Saint-Petersbourg* is itself a 'correspondance' that illuminates Baudelaire, if not the *Arcades* itself. Describing a museum of natural history 'exposed to the shock of an earthquake', we read about how 'order is visible as the disorder . . . in the general confusion, a multitude of analogues have already taken their place once again and come into contact' [J86,2].