# Spectropolitics: Ghosts of the Global Contemporary / Introduction

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This part explores the reach of spectrality in a geographical and theoretical sense. How far has the spectral turn, emerging from the western nexus of France, Britain, and the United States, extended? And how has it, in being taken up in different contexts to address the quandaries of not merely the past and its persistence in the present but also contemporary life and its socio-political configurations, been positioned in relation to influential critical frameworks such as postmodernism, postcoloniality, materialism, nationalism, and, especially, globalization?

In many ways, spectrality appears as a global figure. Across the world, there exist imaginative and social traditions involving ghost-like beings and other elusive phenomena. These include humans returned from the dead or contactable in an afterlife, animistic entities hovering between the perceptible and the imperceptible that occupy particular sites or are able to possess people, as well as forms of telepathic communication, alternative healing, and divination. Called by a variety of names, capable of producing widely divergent acts and effects, and eliciting reactions covering the spectrum from extreme fear and paranoia to comfort or reverence, the one element conceivably uniting these beings and phenomena is their ambivalent multiplicity—the reference to the liminal form of being (and thinking) encompassing life and death, human and non-human, presence and absence,

that spectrality has been taken to exemplify. However, this aspect of both ... and—which is equally one of neither ... nor-does not necessarily have identical implications, as not every society is structured according to the same binary oppositions or assigns them the same degree of fixity. As Benson Saler has shown, the category of the supernatural, to which ghosts are readily assigned, is itself not universal, but a western construct with a convoluted history.1 Thus, what appears as shared spectrality is in fact diachronically and synchronically refracted, comprising a range of habits, customs, and traditions, all subject to change. The very use of the term "ghost" already entails turning one, essentially Judeo-Christian, mode into the paradigmatic one, just as the seemingly neutral "spectral" carries with it implications of ocularcentrism that mark it as a product of western modernity. In order to avoid overlooking crucial differentiations, a more reflective use of the available terminology has emerged that acknowledges the necessity of ongoing efforts of intercultural translation, also within the so-called West, where certain parts are more pervasively haunted than others and very different types of ghostly creatures may be discerned.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, in recent decades, the ghost has become an increasingly *globalized* figure as it relentlessly crosses borders, in multiple directions, in practices and imaginations transported through travel, migration, and the global culture industries. This has caused various traditions to intersect and intermingle, for example in the tsunami of Asian "ghost" films remade by Hollywood (where "Asian" should itself be differentiated into Japanese, Korean, and Chinese, at the least) and ensuing co-productions.<sup>3</sup> As we have noted, on the academic stage, too, spectrality has experienced a rapid spread: the theories of Derrida and others have been taken up across continents, in both affirmative and reconstituting manners. The point of this part is not to present different "ghostly" traditions as incommensurable or to reject spectrality as a potentially useful heuristic instrument, but rather to insist on taking seriously the disarticulations that remain even as a spectral Esperanto seems to be emerging.

Spectrality has also emerged as a figure of globalization, past and present. "Some might argue," Ann Laura Stoler writes in her introduction to *Haunted by Empire*, "that being an effective empire has long been contingent on partial visibility – sustaining the ability to remain an affective and unaccountable one."<sup>4</sup> Empire is conceived as a haunting structure, both in the way it worked when it was in operation—acting simultaneously at a distance and through "strangely familiar 'uncanny' intimacies"—and in its legacy of "implicated histories in the disquieting present."<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the processes associated with the present-day spread of particular economic models (most prominently, neoliberal capitalism) and new (social) media, which reconfigure the world as one of inescapable interconnection, have been conceived as spectral (ungraspably complex, only partially material, accelerated to the point of disappearance, capable of occupying multiple

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spaces at once) and spectralizing (producing subjects that stand apart from the rest of society, either, at the top, as unaccountable or, at the bottom, as expendable). This is clear, for example, in Derrida's enumeration of the ten plagues of the "new world order," comprising unemployment produced by deregulation, the exclusion of the homeless and other undesirable subjects, economic war, the contradictions of free market capitalism, the proliferation of foreign debt, the arms industry and trade, nuclear weapons, inter-ethnic wars grounded in "a *primitive conceptual phantasm* of community," the "phantom-States" of the mafia and drug cartels, and the limits of international law.<sup>6</sup> All four texts gathered in this part engage in what may be called, in Derrida's wake, a "spectropolitics," an attempt to mobilize spectrality to more precisely designate the diffuse operations and effects of present-day globalization, as well as to critique the way its processes produce certain subjects as consistently disenfranchised or, in Judith Butler's terms, forced to live in extreme precarity as "would-be humans, the spectrally human."<sup>7</sup>

In accordance with the general ambivalence of the specter, a spectropolitics is never straightforward: Derrida uses it to refer to Marx's attempt to "separate out the good from the bad 'ghosts," which turns out to be "so difficult and risky, beyond any possible mastery."8 A necessarily confused and confusing concept capable of evoking both nightmarish scenarios of dehumanization and dreams of revolution, spectropolitics reveals, first of all, the increasingly spectral nature of the political. As Andrew Hussey notes, politics "has become an empty cipher in a world where the possibility of systematic critical thought has evaporated and with it the potential for any ideology to challenge the phantasmatic multi-layered structures of the post-political world."9 This renders traditional Marxist strategies reliant on countering "global falsification" impotent and may require instead a form of counterconjuration.<sup>10</sup> Here, spectropolitics emerges as the site of potential change, where ghosts, and especially the ability to haunt and the willingness to be haunted, to live with ghosts, can work, as Janice Radway argues in her foreword to Avery F. Gordon's Ghostly Matters, to "revivify our collective capacity to imagine a future radically other to the one ideologically charted out already by the militarized, patriarchal capitalism that has thrived heretofore on the practice of social erasure."<sup>11</sup>

It is with the first, introductory chapter of Gordon's book—which, first published in 1997 and reissued in 2008, remains one of the most widely read texts of the spectral turn—that this part opens. As a sociologist, Gordon is primarily interested in exploring everyday life in the present, under the conditions of what she calls "racial capitalism."<sup>12</sup> Her recourse to an idiom of haunting and ghosts is prompted by the desire "to understand modern forms of dispossession, exploitation, repression, and their concrete impacts on the people most affected by them and on our shared conditions of living."<sup>13</sup> Situations of disorientation in which these forms, normally unacknowledged, unexpectedly come to the fore are conceived as scenes of haunting, producing ghosts or specters that impose a demand for attention and, crucially, action (recognition *and* reparation). Gordon's selectivity with regard to the many possible implications of spectrality—"To see the something-to-be-done as characteristic of haunting was, on the one hand, no doubt to limit its scope"<sup>14</sup>—is motivated by her desire to inspire political change through a broadening of the epistemological framework. If it is to engage with the whole of the social realm, sociology cannot remain blind to the claims for participation and alternative forms of knowledge that emerge from the subjugated—of the past and the present.

Most chapters in Ghostly Matters focus on specific hauntings originating in situated historical injustices: Sabina Spielrein's elision from the early history of psychoanalysis, the desaparecidos of Argentina's Dirty War, and North-American slavery. These injustices inhabit the present, in ghostly form, not yet understood, not yet fully known; truly apprehending and addressing them requires a perspective combining a materialist with an affective, sensuous dimension. What Gordon proposes, in this respect, is an "other sociological imagination" that invokes Walter Benjamin's notion of profane illumination and "conjures, with all the affective command the world conveys, ... do[ing] so because it has a greatly expanded impression of the empirical that includes haunted people and houses and societies and their worldly and sometimes otherworldly contacts."15 The chapter included here, entitled "her shape and his hand," sets out the parameters for this new sociological imagination in which ghosts and haunting can come to matter by contrasting it with the "antighost" stance seen to characterize postmodernism.<sup>16</sup> Rather than assuming that everything is illuminated on a plane of hypervisibility, Gordon accommodates ghosts in order to reveal precisely that which normally escapes notice-that which, in Jacques Rancière's terms, is excluded by the reigning partage du sensible or distribution of the sensible.<sup>17</sup> Fittingly, her method exceeds the limits of what sociology considers to make sense by mobilizing the ghost tales of Luisa Valenzuela and Toni Morrison; in literature, Gordon suggests, blind spots can be located and ways of re-illuminating them imagined.<sup>18</sup>

On the basis that every society will have oversights and disavowals that reverberate below the surface, Gordon refers to haunting as a "generalizable social phenomenon."<sup>19</sup> In contrast, the second (excerpted) text in this part, Achille Mbembe's "Life, Sovereignty, and Terror in the Fiction of Amos Tutuola," deals with spectrality in an explicitly non-western manner. Confronting a political present that, particularly in previously colonized parts of the world, establishes "*extreme forms of human life, death-worlds*, forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life that confer upon them the status of living dead (ghosts)" is thought to require a departure from dualistic western modes of thought grounded in the separation of the rational and the irrational, and all the other oppositions tied to these binaries, including that of the real and the spectral.<sup>20</sup>

From the Nigerian author Amos Tutuola—whose *My Life in the Bush* of *Ghosts* and *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, based on Yoruba folktales, invoke ghostly realms reaching into the human world—Mbembe takes the figure of the *wandering subject*, for whom there is no self-mastery, but who is instead forced into a continuous re-making of the self through the profoundly ambiguous and fraught dimensions of imagination, work, and remembrance. The wandering subject is ruled by ghostly terror, manifesting as the fearsome machinations of an illogical, ungraspable system that negates all singularity and security, and imposes a constant threat of dismemberment and death. This applies, beyond Tutuola's protagonists, to those human subjects condemned by the globalized, postcolonial world to desperate existences on the verge of death, considered so dispensable that even to haunt may lie outside of their power.<sup>21</sup>

Mbembe invokes a non-western realm in which ghostly beings—in the literal sense—are part of the ordinary and exorcism (in the sense of completely doing away with them) is not an option; in such a realm, spectrality, even when taken as metaphor or concept, occupies a different ontological and epistemological position and mobilizes other meanings, effects, and affects. Most importantly, unlike Derrida's *hauntology*, it does not serve as a counterweight or corrective to a stable, unitary sense of self, but exemplifies a pervasive lack of permanence and singularity that was never otherwise. Whereas Gordon and Derrida focus on the haunted and how they should handle ghosts, which are always other to them, Mbembe takes the perspective of those who (are made to) live *as* ghosts. At the same time, he stresses how the ghost may also conceptualize the way power (especially when manifesting as terror and violence) is itself spectral (unpredictable, unassailable, unaccountable), making it virtually impossible to challenge or escape.

Another non-western context featuring its own singular refraction of the nexus between spectrality and globalization is addressed by Arjun Appadurai. His "Spectral Housing and Urban Cleansing: Notes on Millennial Mumbai," the third text of this part, traces the post-1970 transition, under the combined influence of "predatory global capital" and the growing virulence of Hindu nationalism, from Bombay as a cosmopolitan industrial center and "civic model" to Mumbai as an ethnicized city in which those marked as not belonging become targets for violence and removal.<sup>22</sup>

Spectrality is operative in this transition in interconnected ways. It characterizes, first of all, the city's monetary system, which, on the symbolic level at least, is driven by displays of cash as the "mobile and material instantiation of forms of wealth that are known to be so large as to be immaterial."<sup>23</sup> Cash, in other words, gives body to the ungraspable flows

of capital generated by official and shadow economies alike, while, through its transactional status as always being passed on, marking the way this body can never fully incarnate. Second, there is the housing market as "space of speculation and specularities," where many homes are insecure (to the point of existing as no more than a spot on the pavement), frenzied imaginations of possible new supplies abound, and people partake in a "spectral domesticity" that uses household goods to make up for the actual home's inadequacy or absence.<sup>24</sup> The third site of spectrality, where the other two converge, is that of the re-imagination of Bombay as Mumbai, which, more than a rejection of colonial legacies, constitutes a projection of Hindu nationalism. This re-imagination-which turned hallucinatory in the riots that followed, in 1992 and 1993, upon the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya-retains global aspirations, while seeking to eradicate internal difference. In it, the lack of space that characterizes the system of spectral housing and the pressures of the cash economy provide justifications for removing unwanted Muslim bodies and businesses. Noting that "specters and utopias—as practices of the imagination—occupy the same moral terrain," Appadurai emphasizes that there has also been a counterconjuration proceeding through "powerful images of a cosmopolitan, secular, multicultural Bombay, and a Mumbai whose 43,000 hectares could be reorganized to accommodate its 5 million poorly housed citizens."25 Spectrality, when read in a certain way in relation to a particular context, may represent a dangerous deformation of the real that, precisely in its unreality, is capable of producing actual violence, but it may also work, in a utopian mode, to effectuate a return to what was-and could again be-real. Thus, the specter's association with the imagination, with that which exceeds knowledge and rationality, does not make it inherently emancipatory or reactionary, but cuts both ways.<sup>26</sup>

The final text in this part, Peter Hitchcock's "( ) of Ghosts" from *Oscillate Wildly: Space, Body, and Spirit of Millennial Materialism* (1999), reconfigures the relation between spectrality and materialism. As a whole, the book centers on the concept of oscillation, which, implying both "restless inquiry" and "vacillation — a moment of doubt, of hesitation, of wavering," may itself be seen as spectral.<sup>27</sup> The turn to oscillation is designed to find a way for materialism to (continue to) matter as a route to "more just, egalitarian forms of society" in a world remade by globalization:

[T]he double entendre of oscillation is what must be risked if materialism is to articulate a radical politics apposite with the tremendous dislocations of contemporary social orders. Oscillation means embracing the dynamic changes of the present, the specific intensities of globalization or the aftermath of imploding socialist states for instance, but with the attendant hazard of vacillation. At the conscious and unconscious levels of intellectual inquiry it now presents itself as a *determinate condition*  of materialism. This is precisely how the assuredness (and masculinism) of traditional forms of materialism are being shaken out of their ossified practices.<sup>28</sup>

One of the ways Hitchcock reforms materialism for the twenty-first century is by invoking the ghost or spirit as inherent to it: "It is not mindless metaphoricity or torpid tropism that puts these spirits into play, but the oscillations of materialist thought itself ... The specters of Marx are not just the workers who do not have a social form for their socialization or realization, but the philosophical ghosts that Marxism cannot simply put to rest within its critical framework without collapsing it."29 This notion is elaborated in a reading of class that oscillates between Derrida's deconstruction and the Marxism of Etienne Balibar. While class is thought to enter a state of disappearance under the conditions of global capitalism, it is in effect already ephemeral in Marx's work. The proletariat, in particular, is "unrepresentable," appearing only as it is being superseded.<sup>30</sup> Rather than resolving this paradox, it can be taken up critically in what Hitchcock calls a "spectral empiricism" that emphasizes materialism's status as a theory not so much of being as becoming.<sup>31</sup> Within such a framework, the ghost ceases to be a figure only of unreality or illusion: "The reality of class as spectral does not mean it does not exist; it means merely that one grasps the immaterial as also and already constituent of material reality."<sup>32</sup> In a later consideration of the way the communist past inheres in the preserved corpses of Mao and Lenin, Hitchcock places the reverse emphasis, on the need to retain the materiality of spectrality by configuring the ghost (through the uncanny, the cyborg, and the work of Slavoj Žižek) as a figure of likeness, of replication.<sup>33</sup> Spectrality, from this perspective, cannot be simply opposed to materialism, but is intimately intertwined with it, in ways that differ according to the specific historico-political context.<sup>34</sup>

While all four texts in this part take different angles—especially in terms of the theoretical frameworks employed and/or challenged—they share a concern with analyzing the metaphor of the ghost as it operates in the contemporary realm, as capable, on the one hand, of illuminating certain aspects of the way global capitalism works and, on the other, of proposing a new politics that would counteract its dispossessing effects. Moreover, they foreground the need to carefully contextualize and historicize spectrality. In the end, there are no truly global ghosts. Spectrality may have global reach (and provide a way of grasping globalization), but it invariably requires careful contextualization and historicization.

### Notes

- 1 Benson Saler, "Supernatural as a Western Category," *Ethos 5*, no. 1 (1977): 31–53.
- 2 Recent volumes emphasizing the existence of distinct traditions include Judith Misrahi-Barak and Melanie Joseph-Villain, eds., *Postcolonial Ghosts* (Montpellier: Presses universitaires de la Méditerranée, 2009) and María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren, eds., *Popular Ghosts: The Haunted Spaces of Everyday Culture* (New York and London: Continuum, 2010).
- 3 See, for example, Pieter Aquilia, "Westernizing Southeast Asian Cinema: Co-productions for 'Transnational' Markets." *Continuum: Journal of Media* & *Cultural Studies* 20, no. 4 (2006): 433–45.
- 4 Ann Laura Stoler, "Intimidations of Empire: Predicaments of the Tactile and Unseen," in *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History*, ed. Ann Laura Stoler (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), 9.
- 5 Ibid., 14, 20.
- 6 Jacques Derrida, Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, & the New International, trans. Peggy Kamuf (1993; London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 81–3.
- 7 Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London and New York: Verso, 2006), 91. The "spectrally human" connects, through Butler's reframing of Foucault's notion of governmentality, to Giorgio Agamben's *homo sacer*, the Roman figure of exclusion that reappears under the biopolitical conditions of modern democracy and technology as "a new living dead man, a new sacred man." Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (1995; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 131.
- 8 Derrida, Specters, 107.
- 9 Andrew Hussey, "Spectacle, Simulation and Spectre: Debord, Baudrillard, and the Ghost of Marx," *Parallax* 7, no. 3 (2001): 67.
- 10 Ibid., 70.
- 11 Janice Radway, "Foreword," in *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, Avery Gordon (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), xiii.
- 12 Avery Gordon, "Introduction to the New Edition," in *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), xv.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Ibid., xvii.
- 15 Gordon, Ghostly Matters, 204.
- 16 Ibid., 13. Whether Don DeLillo's novel *White Noise*, which Gordon takes as exemplary of this postmodernist stance, unambiguously endorses a world

without secrets, gaps, or ghosts is debatable; the novel has also been read as precisely a critique of the disenchanted society of the spectacle. See, for example, Matthew J. Parker, "'At the Dead Center of Things' in Don DeLillo's White Noise: Mimesis, Violence, and Religious Awe," *Modern Fiction Studies* 51, no. 3 (2005): 648–66; Cornel Bonca, "Don DeLillo's White Noise: The Natural Language of the Species," *College Literature* 23, no. 2 (1996): 25–44.

- 17 See Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (2000; London and New York: Continuum, 2004).
- 18 Rancière, too, argues that politics and sociology require a phantasmagoric element: "the ordinary becomes a trace of the true if it is torn from its obviousness in order to become a hieroglyph, a mythological or phantasmagoric figure. This phantasmagoric dimension of the true, which belongs to the aesthetic regime of the arts, played an essential role in the formation of the critical paradigm of the human and social sciences... Scholarly history tried to separate out various features within the aestheticopolitical configuration that gave it its object. It flattened this phantasmagoria of the true into the positivist sociological concepts of mentality/expression and belief/ignorance." *Politics of Aesthetics*, 34.
- 19 Gordon, Ghostly Matters, 7.
- 20 Achille Mbembe, "Life, Sovereignty, and Terror in the Fiction of Amos Tutuola," *Research in African Literatures* 34, no. 4 (2003): 1.
- 21 See also Mbembe's "Necropolitics," which expands his consideration of *death-worlds* and the problem of sovereignty as "the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die" in direct reference to Foucault's biopolitics and Agamben's *homo sacer*, and in relation to real-world examples, historical (slavery, Nazism, colonialism) and contemporary (late-modern colonial occupation, high-tech warfare). *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 11. For other considerations of spectrality and the postcolonial, see Misrahi-Barak and Joseph-Villain, *Postcolonial Ghosts*; Michael F. O'Riley, "Postcolonial Haunting: Anxiety, Affect, and the Situated Encounter," *Postcolonial* Text 3, no. 4 (2007): 1–15; Stephen Morton, "Postcolonialism and Spectrality: Political Deferral and Ethical Singularity in the Writing of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak," *Interventions* 1, no. 4 (1999): 605–20.
- 22 Arjun Appadurai, "Spectral Housing and Urban Cleansing: Notes on Millennial Mumbai," *Public Culture* 12, no. 3 (2000): 627, 628.
- 23 Ibid., 634.
- 24 Ibid., 643.
- 25 Ibid., 650.
- 26 For a different reading of spectral nationalism in the context of postcoloniality and globalization, see Pheng Cheah, "Spectral Nationalism: The Living On [*sur-vie*] of the Postcolonial Nation in Neocolonial Globalization," *boundary* 2 26, no. 3 (1999): 225–52. Critiquing theorists of nationalism for invoking a vitalist ontology that pitches the life of the people against the dead (ideology of the) state, Cheah takes up Derrida's notion of

spectrality to argue for "the mutual haunting of the nation-people and the state" (245): "As long as we continue to think of 'the people' or 'the peoplenation' in analogy with a living body or a source of ever present life, then the postcolonial state qua political and economic agent is always the necessary supplement of the revolutionary nation-people, the condition for its living on after decolonization. The nation-people can come into freedom only by attaching itself to the postcolonial bourgeois state. It can live on only through this kind of death. The state is an uncontrollable specter that the nationpeople must welcome within itself, and direct, at once for itself and against itself, because this specter can possess the nation-people and bend it toward global capital interests" (247). Arguing this requires rejecting Derrida's association of nationalism with ontopology: "The decolonizing nation is not an archaic throwback to traditional forms of community based on the blind ties of blood and kinship but a new form of political community engendered by the spectrality of modern knowledge, techno-mediation, and modern organization" (250).

- 27 Peter Hitchcock, Oscillate Wildly: Space, Body, and Spirit of Millennial Materialism (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 3.
- 28 Ibid., 2, 3-4.
- 29 Ibid., 144-5.
- 30 Ibid., 151.
- 31 Ibid., 152. Further on, Hitchcock writes: "Materialism is not just a theory of materiality but also about processes of materialization and dematerialization ... It is a theory (philosophical and more) about 'becoming.' Marx makes the conjuring of ghosts a symptom of the materialization of theory. It is not some idle image but an active component of his explanatory critique. The point is not to collapse back this theorization into the discursive trope that is its possibility, but to understand the trope as an operative logic in the model proposed" (155).
- 32 Ibid., 159.
- 33 Peter Hitchcock, "Uncanny Marxism: Or, Do Androids Dream of Electric Lenin?" in Blanco and Peeren, Popular Ghosts, 35-49. For Žižek's use of spectrality, see especially his "Introduction: The Spectre of Ideology," in Mapping Ideology, Slavoj Žižek ed. (London and New York: Verso, 1994), 1-33 and Welcome to the Desert of the Real (London and New York: Verso, 2002). In the latter text, he writes, in reference to 9/11: "the dialectic of semblance and Real cannot be reduced to the rather elementary fact that the virtualization of our daily lives, the experience that we are living more and more in an artificially constructed universe, gives rise to an irresistible urge to 'return to the Real', to regain firm ground in some 'real reality'. The Real which returns has the status of a(nother) semblance: *precisely because it is* real, that is, on account of its traumatic/excessive character, we are unable to integrate it into (what we experience as) our reality, and are therefore compelled to experience it as a nightmarish apparition.... Much more difficult than to denounce/unmask (what appears as) reality as fiction is to recognize the part of fiction in 'real' reality" (19).

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34 Against generalizing uses of the spectral that turn it into a "paradoxically unbound relationality," Hitchcock argues: "Yes, the process of the spectral actualizes, but the verb and the concept are tainted by the wisps of history which is why this symptom must be engaged and radically particularized rather than inflated. Only then will we begin to fathom how the public sphere became so phantomatic and communicative action so fanciful." Hitchcock, "The Impossibly Intersubjective and the Logic of the Both," in *The Shock of the Other: Situating Alterities*, ed. Silke Horstkotte and Esther Peeren (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2007), 34–5.