

Ghost of Chance

Human beings¹

[...] sold [their] soul for time, language, tools, weapons and dominance. And to make sure [they don't] get out of line, these invaders keep an occupying garrison in [their] nondominant brain hemisphere. How else to explain anything as biologically disadvantageous as a weak hand? They gave with one hand and took back with the other. Fifty-fifty. What could be fairer than that? Almost anything.

William S. Burroughs, *Ghost of Chance*

The exhibition *Ghost of Chance*, on display at La Nave, in Madrid, forms a dialogue between the collections of Sánchez-Ubiría and António Cachola, collections which stand out as important examples of collectionism in the Iberian Peninsula. The disciplinary and thematic range, scope and diversity of the two collections made this a complex task, hindered (or perhaps facilitated) even more by my familiar, biographical and emotional relationship with the António Cachola collection, and now also with the Sánchez-Ubiría collection. An exercise of ghost and chance.

Burroughs' utopian dystopia or Burroughs' dystopian utopia

Dystopia and utopia seem not to work as antonyms any more, or perhaps they never worked, except for in a purely semantic context. Dystopias and utopias that emerged in various forms of artistic expression, over the course of time, seem to have always gone hand in hand and shared the same attributes: unlikely, impossible, serving as warnings. Thus, William Burroughs' book: *Ghost of Chance*² is the namesake and inspiration for this exhibition. Far from being among the best work of one of the most important figures of the Beat Generation, this work, which combines essay and fictional narrative, reveals with remarkable prescience the possibility of an ethical and ecological apocalypse.

The hero, who in Burroughs is always obscure, is Captain Mission, a pirate who, in the 18th century, founds *Libertatia*, on the coast of Madagascar, a supposedly ecological and egalitarian colony where people have the right to sexual freedom. There, lemurs, animals which in the native language are called ghosts, must be protected at all costs. With the death of Mission, the protector of lost species, *Libertatia* is transformed from a utopia into a dystopia, and a series of plagues and disease take over the world, which suffers as much with the illness as with the cure.

In this respect, the exhibition on display here, in the context of curatorial speculation and subjection to the free and individual hermeneutics of the spectator, takes on the role of a

¹ In the original text by William Burroughs, the term 'man' is used to refer humankind, which was thought ethically irresponsible to reproduce in 2018.

² In spite of the Spanish version of Burroughs' book being titled 'El Fantasma Accidental', a more literal translation was chosen as the title for this exhibition.

visual programme and a social and political warning. On the one hand, it attempts (and constantly fails) to relate to Burroughs' imagery, in the absence of effective referents or a familiar structure; the book being a sharp critique of logocentrism and the vice of always seeing things in the same way and wanting to always see the same. On the other hand, and in spite of the decades in between, the problems detected and demonstrated by the author persist both in social relations and the ethical and aesthetic concerns of artistic production: time; expectation; language, its uses and disuses, encryption and decryption; the body, disease, cure and death; tools and technology; weapons, domination, power and counterpower.

Running through Burroughs' text is a sense of suffering in the world, of the failure of humanity in longevity, of hardened pessimism. The use of the term 'ghost', in a predominantly negative sense, cannot have been mere coincidence. We are reminded of Mark Fisher's (much later) association of ghosts with lost futures³. This pessimism is only weakened by allusions to Mission and the political performativity that his name evokes.

The ghost as a functional category of the contemporary

The evocation of the idea of ghost allows us to reflect on the way in which contemporary artistic practices follow and articulate the discussion on ghosts, apparitions and spectres, understood here in the broad sense as imagetic entities that haunt, project shadows and provoke the uncanny. Diverse phantasmatic and spectral tendencies occupy a central position in the genealogy of (visual) culture and in the history of ideas, reflecting the fears, desires and fantasies of humankind. Over the centuries, oral, written and visual narratives emerged which put in motion supernatural and paranormal characters and phenomena, magic and fantastic figures, legends and myths, clichés and taboos about good and evil, which transformed the 'ghost' into a functional category of reflection.

The longevity of this presence in the cultural context, which gained renewed relevance with the emergence of new mechanic technologies, from the gramophone to cinema, led, at the end of the 20th century, to the integration of a metamorphosis in the understanding of concepts of apparition, ghost and spectre: from cultural themes and objects to conceptual metaphors for culture. This metamorphosis, identified by María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren in the introduction to *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory*⁴, results in a new theoretical framework that illuminates this issue in a number of ways. Understanding the concept of ghost as a 'conceptual

³ Mark Fisher's book, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*, United Kingdom: Zero Books, was published in 2014.

⁴ BLANCO, María del Pilar, PEREEN Esther (2013), *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory*, London: Bloomsbury

metaphor', as referred to by Mieke Bal⁵, allows us to produce new forms of theoretical and artistic knowledge, and to find new frames of dialogue between works and artists.

Part of the ontology of the phantasmatic figure is an interstitial existence between the visible and the invisible, materiality and immateriality, which transforms it into an ambiguous and paradoxical apparition, without ever forgetting that this ambiguity and paradox has political force. Many of the works displayed here create and cast shadows, at the same time questioning the potential for an image to contain and project other images. While the word ghost ranges from the vernacular to the speculatively essayistic, theoretical production has focussed more attention on the concepts of spectre and spectrality. Sharing the same root as words such as spectacle and spectator, these terms derive from the Latin expression *spectrum*, which refers to a simulacrum and/or apparition.

In this etymological origin we can find a congenital relationship with the field of vision and the visual, which makes spectres constant elements of the transglobal collective imagery. Whether formless or animal, phantasmagory evokes the unknown and provokes fear and terror, constantly challenging various ideas of death. Fear – of death, disease and suffering – thus acquires the same foundational capacity that was at the centre of the creation of religious beliefs, moral standards of behaviour and ideologies. Jacques Derrida's *Spectres of Marx*⁶ tackle these same issues, which have always been present in the History of Art.

The archive, or the 'archival impulse' as Hal Foster calls it⁷, appeals to a former visuality that returns to haunt the present, exploring an archival territory that constructs (often contradictory) imaginations of historiography. Some of the works on display in this exhibition explore the archive in diverse ways, sometimes with its desacralisation, sometimes with an archaeological-mediatic interrogation that recovers the image of an apparently obsolete visual technology, but which also questions the very idea of obsolescence.

The contemporary trend for hyper-imagery, which pushes for a visualisation of all existence, transforms the invisible itself into one of the most prolific categories of the visual field. This tendency forces us to rethink notions of materiality, resorting to the subjective creation of the image of a phantasmatic image by the viewer. The ghost of

⁵ According to Mieke Bal, the 'conceptual metaphor' differs from metaphors as mere stylistic or rhetorical resources, due to its ability to create and produce knowledge. The understanding of the ghost as a conceptual metaphor was taken from the text by María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren mentioned above.

⁶ DERRIDA, Jacques (1994), *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, Translated by Peggy Kamuf, New York: Routledge

⁷ FOSTER, Hal (2006), "An Archival Impulse", in Charles Merewether (ed.) *The Archive*, London, Cambridge, and Massachusetts: Whitechapel Gallery and The MIT PRESS, pp. 143-148.

chance is also the distance between the intention of the artist – if it exists – and the interpretation-sensation of the viewer.

The selected works contribute, therefore, to an understanding of the opportunities of phantasmagory in its plurality, allowing us to consider contemporary visual culture in the light of the impact of technological mediation, the phenomenological and cultural complexity of the gaze, and artistic creation as ecology (also of knowledge) and resistance. While ghosts and apparitions materialised, in the past, as dark figures, today they can be understood as functional categories of contemporary thought, often fleeing from the light.

Ana Cristina Cachola

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