GÖRAN DAHLBERG

Ghost Life

Hauntings in the society of spectres

© 2020 by Göran Dahlberg

Multimedijalni institut
ISBN 978-953-7372-62-0

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the National and University Library in Zagreb under 001072708.

Cover art: Meriç Algün, Blue River Red Border from the series A Hook or a Tail
[2013 • Vinyl and acrylic paint on wall • Courtesy the artist]

Zagreb, August 2020

GÖRAN DAHLBERG

Ghost Life

Hauntings in the society of spectres

Every character is fictitious.

— 1 —

Everyone is there. Every one.

—

A ghost story is populated by the expelled, now returned. Unpleasant truths. Preferably, stories should be coherent. Someone has to fill in, cover up, and accept the role of missing link, transitional object, the intermediary one. In the end someone always does. There is always an intermediary one. The ghost hides only what cannot show itself or be shown. It also shows itself to be entirely in order. Its own order.

—

The rumour that history is going to end with the appearance of some ghost or other has proven to be a misunderstanding. A ghost story is a story about whatever or whoever 'continues not to take place'. A sad story. There are simply no words for it. It would not be possible. Words are not like that. *It* is not like that.

—

So, this is it, this is how it all turned out? How I turned out? Is this the way it is going to be? The way I'm going to be? A few years ago, in 2013, a study was published in the journal *Science* where 19,000 people were asked to look back on their lives and answer questions about

how they had evolved over the past ten years in terms of interests, opinions, tastes, values. Most people claimed to have changed quite a bit. When guessing what life would be like in ten years time, however, they replied that they would probably not change at all but remain just as they were now. Almost all of these people, aged between 18 and 68, believed that they had reached the end of history. As if the end of history could be remembered.

—

One famous ghost story is about 'the society of the spectacle' ('the very heart of this real society's unreality'), a story that seeks to restore to the ghost its rightful life among other representations. Appearances are everything. The word spectacle derives from

the French *spectacle*, view, vision, performance, play, and the French word, in its turn, comes from the Latin *spectare*, to see. It has the same root as *spectre*. Ghosts are the ideological figures in this spectacle. Society is increasingly virtual, and the debate over representation in the society of the spectacle is often translated into a question of simulation, also in the field of science. Authority is still attached to seeing, and the attendant ability to transform image into reality.

—

Once I started noticing them, they seemed to be everywhere, whether I was looking for them or not. As with so much else. And there really is so much else. Sudden glimpses of presumed invisibilities, distinct notions of allegedly

indiscernible sounds, obviously destructive feelings that won't let go. All phenomena supposedly justifying my attention being elsewhere, zoomed out, out of that coveted high-contrast focus.

—

Is there anyone who never suspected that a signifier doesn't fully correspond to the signified? Do other animals believe in ghosts? Do they relate to a presence they never touched, smelled, saw, or heard? Are there evolutionary advantages to such a belief? According to historian Yuval Noah Harari, the imagination required to believe in ghosts is 70,000 years old and it is this capacity that has enabled the sapiens to control the world. Imagination lets itself be expressed

collectively, as myths held in common, and, Harari writes, what happened 70,000 years ago was a cognitive revolution. That's when the story began. The story: a story of ghosts. Those whose absence is so terrifyingly present that it must be spoken. Since this beginning, most of human activity centers on our ability to tell stories and make others believe in them. Neanderthals did not create a world of collective ideas, and this indicates they did not believe in ghosts. Now the Neanderthals are all gone, apart from their spectral genetical presence. It was recently discovered that around four percent of their genes are preserved in living humans.

—

Every collection of words contains ghost words — not least the dictionary. Obviously, such a book contains words that refer to ghostly matters, but there are also misprints, misreadings, misinterpretations — there are even words inserted to stop someone from copying all the words and publishing them in a new volume with a new name, claiming authorship. According to my source in the dictionary business, every publisher puts in such ghost words. So far, nobody has collected them in one place. There is no ghost dictionary.

— 2 —

The first two millennia of human history were pretty uneventful. The conditions for human life barely changed. People hunted and gathered; over time they began to use sharpened sticks or flint stones. That was about it. But behind the scenes, the brain's neural network was continuously developing. Over the past 10,000 years, things have picked up with people surviving and adapting like never before. While this adaptability means that lives are longer, humans can seem to give up their individuality when they adjust too easily, too well. They become yes-men, turncoats, software.

—

People have always mimicked other people. But recently, focus has shifted to resurrect an old question: What would nature have done? Some people look to the spider, which weaves its web of threads with a natural combination of strength, elasticity, and recyclability. By copying some of the spider's amino acids, humans are working to produce fabrics with the same qualities. Underneath the feet of the gecko lizard are small bristles which allow the animal to hang upside down from the ceiling; using nanotechnology, engineers imitate the lizard to develop a tape that is sticky without using glue. Leaves can store solar energy; in the ongoing pursuit of artificial photosynthesis researchers have developed molecular machines powered by sunlight and water. Dolphins perceive and expel high

frequency sound waves and can identify other dolphins up to 25 kilometres away; tsunami warning systems inspired by their peculiar acoustic abilities are being developed in the Indian Ocean. Chimpanzees treat diseases with plants and people observe them navigate the flora in order to find the useful varieties among the world's 300,000 plant species.

—

Then there are those who almost always refuse to adapt. Like ghosts. But in those instances when they do choose adaptation, they do it better than most. A ghost willingly repeats a tragic event. It can mask the repetition as memory. Turned backwards, it excels at doing the same thing over and over. It seems to have no interest in breaking patterns. It gets stuck

in loops and it can be terrifyingly good at mimicking.

—

Do ghosts believe in ghosts? Do they play their part with conviction? Everyday actions get repeated generation after generation, and finally something manifests itself, a dammed-up effect, a recording, remains of recurrent movements. People mimic each other. Those who do it badly are either not skilled enough to do it better, or they might be seeking to disrupt those ingrained patterns by messing up the mimicry: their imitations are not too bad, but they certainly are not good. Ghosts, too, mimic people, but they have no interest in breaking these patterns. They try to mimic the one they believe themselves to have been, and they do it well.

—

Sometimes it's as if their aim were to assume another form. As though they, too, wanted some thing, some one. To be one. As if those who are and those who are not are never sure of who is who.

—

A really good imitation frightens me. There is something profoundly disturbing about phenomena that are impossible to distinguish as fake. As in cases where it is far from obvious whether or not a really good imitation is the purpose of the act. And if the intention is neither to do it well, nor to do it poorly — what, then, might the purpose be?

—

Human rights can apply to ghosts: in certain parts of the world it is illegal to deny the existence of certain ghosts, just as it is illegal to invoke other ghosts. It's no longer just humans mimicking humans and ghosts mimicking humans; here and now, humans are mimicking ghosts. And there are indeed things worth repeating, not just because of an instinctive compulsion to repeat or because people are constantly beset by other people who wish them to repeat themselves. But some even go so far as to make common cause with the ghosts, judging and condemning, demanding the truth, assigning guilt, refusing to submit to the law. Some turn their back on human rights. Others claim that one has to live, too.

—

Are people more similar to or more different from each other?

—

It's a last resort, pointing out and uniting against the ghosts. Them, if none other. Faced with an external threat, those who point to it will cause their own commonalities to overshadow all singularities. The price is high. It is easy to think that the more enlightened I and my surroundings are, the less threatening the world appears. But this is a misconception. Since the Enlightenment and onward, the act of pointing out has only become more common; it has also increasingly been directed inwards. It is an internal affair, pointing in.

—

The fear of what is coming is greater than the fear of what is, whether whatever is coming comes from history or from the future. 'The already dead cannot be killed, only exorcised'.

—

A ghost is not a matter of urgency. It is urgency. Still, the revolution won't be sparked by ghosts. The revolution will not be ghostified. The dead repeat themselves. The undead, as they manifest themselves in the movies, lumber around the supermarkets tearing down the groceries from the shelves, but not because they need all that stuff. They do need something, but this is not it. The root

of their present desires is nothing but what they wanted when they were alive, kicking, struggling, still trying to find ways.

—

What came first? Is agoraphobia older than the agora? Tunnel vision older than tunnels? The fear of ghosts older than ghosts? After all, can a fear of heights predate heights?

— 3 —

It's said that for every living person there are fifteen dead. So many hidden skeletons. So many cramped closets.

—

There are soon eight billion living, compared to about one hundred billion dead. The dead are harder to count. Not only do estimates of birth rates and death rates in the history of mankind vary greatly, there is also a plethora of theories about when the first humans lived. But since so many more people have lived

and died in recent centuries, the estimated population statistics for 20,000 or 30,000 years ago only have a marginal impact on the proportions between today's living and the historical dead. The same holds for the question of whether the first man lived 50,000 or 100,000 years ago (there is also the Bible's claim that it happened 6,000 years ago, an exception that might affect the ratio). More crucial is the question of what is and is not a human being, for example in the search for the questions to which human life and human death are answers.

—

'I have but two acquaintance, the "Quick and the Dead" — and I would like more.' (Emily Dickinson in a letter to Samuel Bowles, early April 1859)

—

Once, 42,000 refugees were killed as they were trying to cross a river. Who was slayed and who was allowed to live was the result of a decision made on the spot, based on the way each of them pronounced a certain word. According to an oft-repeated story from the Book of Judges (12:4-6) this is what took place: 'The Gileadites seized the fords of the Jordan before the Ephraimites arrived. And when any Ephraimite who escaped said, "Let me cross over," the men of Gilead would say to him, "Are you an Ephraimite?" If he said, "No," then they would say to him, "Then say, "Shibboleth"!" And he would say, "Sibboleth," for he could not pronounce it right. Then they would take him and kill him at the fords of the Jordan.'

—

The password was shibboleth or shibbolet or whichever way you'd like to spell it (additional variants exist: schibboleth or schibbolet or sjibbolet or sjibboleth...) It is a word found in many languages, with small variations in spelling and pronunciation of the crucial sh/sch/sj sound — which the Ephraimites were notoriously unable to pronounce in the manner that prevailed in the region during this era. Today no one remembers how the Gileadites pronounced it, only that it was what separated friend from enemy.

—

Shibboleth is a Hebrew word that can have several different meanings, including river.

Meriç Algün is the name of an artist who, on letters to her home in Stockholm sent by institutions, businesses and authorities, has been addressed as Meric, Meri'', Meri%, Meriã, Maria, Meric?, 'Meri ', Meri?ß, Merip, Merig, Meri&#231, Meri, Meri€, 'Meric'. Meriç is also the name of a river that forms the border between Bulgaria and Greece and between Turkey and Greece. Rivers, just like all borders, don't just function to keep other people out. They are simultaneously invitations to transgress them.

—

If I were to try answering the question of what the contemporary shibboleth is, I would inadvertently subject myself to the test. Am I a part of this or that community? There

are many rivers to cross, many shibboleths. Often proper names. Let me make use of a few: Swedish poet Judith Kiros recently wrote a text about Beyoncé Giselle Knowles-Carter and Warsan Shire, a poet born into a Somali family in Kenya and raised in London. One of Shire's statements, Kiros writes, stuck in her as a bodily memory from the moment she heard it: 'My name doesn't allow me to trust anyone that cannot pronounce it right.' Later, I read the following part of Shire's poem: 'Give your daughters difficult names. / Give your daughters names that command the full use of tongue. My name makes you want to tell me the truth.'

—

A name is given (or taken) in order to refer to a unique individual, such as myself, though I am quite aware that my name is not mine only. My name is Göran, for we are many. More than 25,000 people in Sweden have been given Göran as their first name, and maybe a few more in the rest of the world. It is a legion of terrifying magnitude in such a small language, but we are about to retire. Our average age is 64 years old.

—

On one occasion I formally gave up the right to my name, in every imaginable context and format that it could be found in: 'I, Göran

Dahlberg, understand that Susanne Jansson is writing a book entitled The Forbidden Place (the "Book") to be published by Hodder & Stoughton. I understand that the Book has a character called Göran Dahlberg and that this character will behave in a suspicious manner and become a suspect in a series of murders. I confirm that I have no objection to the use of my name in this manner in the Book for publication in any format.' With my signature I confirmed that I had no objections to it.

—

Can I speak in the name of the unreal without reinforcing the power structure of the real? Is it possible to speak in the name of ghosts? Ultimately, the symbolization, such as the relationship between a word and what it

should signify, or between a pronoun and a noun, always fails. There is always something that remains and only very rarely does anyone manage to settle a symbolic debt. The ghost has no particular independent identity; it is a remainder, an eerie supplement. It does not even let itself be defined negatively, it is not non-life, not non-human. Speaking in its name is just another way to mimic the attempt to escape some identity or other. Such truth-seeking can only be liberating if what I seek is hidden from, or perhaps in, me.

—

The grey eminence of hauntology, Jacques Derrida, writes: 'A *shibboleth*, the word *shibboleth*, if it is one, names, in the broadest extension of its generality or its usage, every

insignificant, arbitrary mark, for example, the phonemic difference between *shi* and *si* when that difference becomes discriminative, decisive, and divisive. The difference has no meaning in and of itself, but it becomes what one must know how to recognize and above all to mark if one is to make the *step*, to step across the border of a place or the threshold of a poem, to see oneself granted the right to asylum or the legitimate habitation of a language. So as no longer to be outside the law.'

—

Crossing a border, there are those who show their body and those who hide it, who need to be as little of a body as possible and therefore even go so far as to mutilate parts of it, like

their fingertips, to avoid identification. There are those who change when they cross, or do not cross, a border, and then there are those who pass it unthinkingly, who cannot even imagine anything going awry. Just as borders call for violation, people on the border call for denial. That so many so often feel compelled to deny the existence of these border-defying lives doesn't mean that the social significance of them can be rejected, even though the difficulties for the disowned to mobilize is very much intended by territorial entities defending their spaces and their dwindling sovereignty. Borders are inventories of what counts, of what should be separated from that which counts for nothing. Life separated from non-life.

—

It is not likely that one would return just to say: 'Forget about me, move on'. If that were indeed one's wish, it would probably be better not to return at all. The ones who return — the haunters — are often hard to understand. They speak in a way that always requires translation into intelligible language.

—

The prisoners whose identities are unknown, who are unregistered and whose charges are unregistered, are called ghost prisoners. Increasingly, they are kept apart from other prisoners, and all available ghosts are recruited to help tormenting the ghost prisoners

further. Eternally. The interrogators are not asking any questions, they are avoiding blame, postponing adjudication: 'You are going to spend the rest of your life here. You will never be released from here. Your life is here.'

—

Making someone disappear is a special form of oppression where the disappeared is deprived of all that is familiar to them. It can be the state's way of evoking the ghosts that haunt the population to make them submit and obey, as Avery Gordon writes in her *Ghostly Matters*. Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo may know better than most people what it means to love someone who has disappeared. The one missing can have an overwhelming presence. These ghosts move along the borders between

the visible and the invisible, between life and death. The only actor with the power to decide where the boundaries go is the state itself. And accordingly, making real what is unreal. For the purposes of the state, the disappeared should not be entirely invisible. Their *perceivability* is necessary for maintaining a sense of fear and horror in the present-day: the disappeared should be forever present in their absence.

—

'Do you want to live temporarily or permanently?' The space allotted for the answer on the visa application form is less than that required to repeat 'temporarily' or 'permanently'. It is a difficult question, and its power would not be undone if it was known to be the result of a slip of the pen. Its difficulty

would not be mitigated if we knew whether it was asked to determine the admissibility of the applicant into another country, or if, instead, it was meant to be read more generally to distinguish between those who can choose how to live their lives and those who cannot. Nor does the difficulty of the question change if we understand it to postulate that the desire for eternal life is the determinant for permission to cross the border.

—

During the millennia that have passed since the Gilaedites' insistent demand for the correct pronunciation of shibboleth, there have been as many ways of separating one life from another as there have been ways of separating life from non-life. The distinctions

ride on the difficulty of imitating something small but specific. There is always something, a stumbling block; something that renders a person a stranger despite her best efforts to copy the elevated traits. Something nearly imperceptible to the untrained eye. It could have remained the same, an old test that a person could practice. But it could also be a new invention, impossible to imitate since nobody has the power to define how it ought to be said or done.

—

The chicken or the egg. Who is the answer and who is the question?

—

Several billion times a day people turn to Google for the answer to a question. The search for answers, however, often takes the form of a statement more than a question — answers that generate answers. In 2015, the year known as that of the European refugee crisis, the most frequent question phrased as a question in the category of queries beginning 'What is...' was the terrifying phrase 'What is 0 divided by 0'. The most frequent question in the category of queries phrased 'How to...' was 'How to use the new Snapchat update'. A question of how best to use an app that has a ghost as its logo, reminding us that even when a face flitters by for a mere instant, it will continue to exist in some form or other, somewhere out there, and it may haunt us for all eternity.

– 4 –

There are the ones who haunt and the ones who hunt for a haunt, a liveable place. The ones who used to haunt Europe, like the spectre of communization, and the settled ones who seem almost obsessed by the notion of an unchanging home. But home isn't what it used to be and as little as someone can embalm it can someone forget what it has been. Like most people I say that I am the way I am, even though I hardly remember the person I once was; ghosts rarely are the way they are, only seldom are where they are, and almost never are when they are.

—

Perhaps the most common way to determine whether ghosts are present or not is after the fact. Only when they leave do I perceive that they could still be there.

—

By assigning a ghost a particular space and attempting to tie it to this location, the space becomes precisely what the ghost needs: an eternal, unchanging home. But also from here will it haunt me. In fact, perhaps it's this particular 'from here' that haunts me. And I am forced to deal with it in some way, to extrapolate from. Or interpolate between *here* and *from*.

—

Ghosts are not contemporary, and even though they sometimes haunt you from the future, they usually come from the past. This is the spectral ethics: to break the presumed dominance of the contemporary, to continue to shape the future, to continue to write ghost stories — as if that were possible. As if haunting and hunting for a haunt can coincide without differences being dissolved.

—

Is the past more similar than it is different?

—

Translation is the original mother tongue of humankind, says Croatian philosopher Rada Iveković. In our biopolitically structured world, translation is a way for her to insist that there is no untranslated state that is untranslated. Returning to the supposed original risks being a double disappointment: it rarely resembles what was once translated, and even if it does it is unlikely to still be relevant. At the same time, there is something uncanny about what is considered untranslatable. Iveković has suggested it has to do with the experience of having a body but not wanting to be reduced to it. In some ways the opposite of the ghost's experience of not having a body and not wanting to be reduced to not having one.

—

Can I miss something I never had? Can I miss someone else's missing? It feels like it. Powerfully so. Most likely that this is once more a construction after the fact.

—

Could it not be the case that those who suffer from Alzheimer's, a disease of forgetfulness, in fact remember too much, rather than too little? The question is posed by psychologist Ulf Karl Olov Nilsson. He wonders if those who suffer from Alzheimer's remember so much that all these memories occasionally push reality aside, making it difficult to determine what is what, who is who. The sick person, is she the same

as who she was before the disorder, just with too many or too few memories?

—

A trauma is not a haunting; a haunting is an appeal, however hard to interpret. A trauma is always incomprehensible, or it would not be a trauma. Still, a trauma is horrible. Nilsson again: what would be more uncanny, that one reacts to a deeply shocking event by transforming to the point of being almost unrecognizable, or that one does not change at all?

—

It is as if people can be closer to me, more present, in my memory than in the world, where there is the chance of us meeting in the flesh. But can I miss someone I no longer remember? Can the lack itself make someone come to—yes, what? Life?

—

'There are two categories of refugees: those who have photographs and those who have none', a Bosnian refugee says in Dubravka Ugrešić's *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*. In a photograph a subject is transformed into an object, Roland Barthes writes. 'I then live a micro-experience of death

(of parenthesis), I become truly a ghost.' As it is with ghosts, according to Barthes, it is with God and the subject too: 'drive them out, they return, and it is our language they ride on.'

—

Hauntings have a parasitic relationship to language. The homely can also look very much like the unhomely, the homicidal, the unheimlich, all the frightening aspects of the homely. There are things that are so horribly familiar that they are scary. Like looking in the mirror and recognizing oneself more than ever before. This is it. This is me.

—

People live here! A thought that overwhelms me when I travel and pass by desolate houses, settlements, and small towns. It never stops being incomprehensible and it always fills me with a sense of loss. My loss of the experience of living in this particular place fully blends with the (probably unreasonable) presumption that those who do live here also suffer the deprivation of the experiences of my life, where I live.

—

When Emma Morano, the world's oldest person at the time, turned 117 years old on November 29, 2016, she said she hadn't left

her apartment for the past 20 years; she also doesn't watch TV and doesn't listen to the radio. She likes to take it easy and eat biscuits.

—

Why is this not where I am from? A thought that occurs to me whenever I spend a few days in a bigger city. The question won't let go. Why could I not have grown up here instead: in New York, Buenos Aires, Tokyo? The thought of moving there is much less common.

—

A lack of peace might be due to the sense that something is unresolved, or that someone

is missing. Even if a ghost never forgets a promise and appears rather focused, it can never finish anything. It claims to have a cause. And it is easier to recognize someone with a cause recognizable as such than someone whose cause is to disturb, challenge fates, upset calculations, move, criticise, just for the hell of it.

—

The battle for reality has many names. According to Judith Butler, it is waged between real and unreal-ungrievable-lives. The struggle and the violence are infinite because the enmity of the enemy is infinite. The violence against 'those who are already not quite living', against those without a name, is invisible. Unreal lives will never become the object of any public process of grieving.

—

It is in the eyes that I see that someone is almost weeping. In the missing tears.

—

The desire to speak with a collective voice is one of history's driving forces. To manage this, it is not enough to agree; one must imagine oneself as familiar with the opinions of others before they have them.

—

It is not only the oppressed that return; so do the oppressors. The right to return is and will remain disputed. How and where will the returnees have a home again, and how are they meant to live alongside those who now claim the right to this as their home? Some are afraid, and more have hope: when those who have been excluded come back, they will blow up the order from which they were excluded. But blowing up the old order might mean also blowing up one's own house, whether the house is haunted or not.

—

If old weapons have no effect on new enemies, maybe new weapons will not have an effect on old enemies.

AUTHOR: Göran Dahlberg
TITLE: Ghost Life — Hauntings in the society of spectres

PUBLISHER: Multimedijalni institut
Preradovićeva 18
HR-10000 Zagreb
PHONE: +385 [0]1 48 56 400
E-MAIL: mi2@mi2.hr
WEB: www.mi2.hr

EDITING: Kira Josefsson

LAYOUT: Dejan Dragosavac Ruta
TYPOGRAPHY: Bara [Nikola Djurek]
PAPER: Munken Print Cream 90 gsm, Peydur Feinleinen 220 gsm
PRINTING: Tiskara Zelina d.d.
PRINT RUN: 300

Printed in Croatia
Zagreb, August 2020

This book is published within the project Vectors of Collective Imagination, a joint project by Multimedijalni institut, Berliner Gazette, Glänta, Kontrapunkt, kuda.org and Kulturtreger. Project is supported by the programme Creative Europe of the European Union.

The publication is also supported by the Ministry of Culture of Republic of Croatia / Government of the Republic of Croatia Office for Cooperation with NGOs / Office for Culture of the City of Zagreb.

The content and views set out in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the donors, who cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Co-funded by the Creative Europe Programme of the European Union

Republika Hrvatska Ministarstvo kulture
Republic of Croatia Ministry of Culture

VLADA REPUBLIKE HRVATSKE
Ured za udruge