

Haunted and Enchanted

by Stéphanie Sauget

Studying the modern craze for ghosts, Caroline Callard sees them as a common and active figure, bearers of the hauntings of time and of conflict resolution, in line with a science that takes on the task of interpreting nature.

About: Caroline Callard, *Le Temps des fantômes. Spectralités de l'âge moderne (XVIe-XVIIe siècle)*, Paris, Fayard, "L'épreuve de l'histoire", 2019. 384 pp., €23.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Weber expressed the theory of the Disenchantment of the world, according to which, from the 16th century onwards, Protestantism had asserted itself as a force of rationalisation that definitively emptied the earthly world of its magic and supernatural beings. This theory has been vehemently contested by anthropological studies, all of which bear witness to the widespread presence of ghosts, consumed greedily by an avid public. As a historian specialised in early Modernity and Renaissance, Caroline Callard examines the period in which Max Weber pinpointed the origin of the exorcism of European societies, i.e. the 16th and 17th centuries, which was a time of Protestant followed by Catholic reform and the rise of the modern State, and reveals not their disappearance or erasure but rather their promotion and dissemination by scholars, in other words the failure of the puritans' large-scale effort to expel ghosts.

The spectral society

Following the example of anthropologist Élisabeth Claverie¹ and sociologist Avery Gordon², Caroline Callard suggests that ghosts should be considered not so much as an object of belief, but rather as a sign of a link which the living forged with the dead, and which carries social or anthropological energy. She also proposes the idea that the force attributed to ghosts during the Renaissance makes sense in a particular historical context—a period of multiple crises (Little Ice Age, civil and religious wars) described ever since Denis Crouzet as “panic time”³—but also reflects a regime of spectrality that has its own economy. Thus re-framed as an epistemological and critical tool, ghosts allow us to study sensory experiences interpreted as borderline and indeterminate experiences by contemporaries, and therefore become “the actor of a world to be discovered, and no longer the beacon of the already-known world”, making it possible to understand what ghosts were capable of doing in Ancien Régime societies and what was done to them in turn.

The book’s central hypothesis posits that modernity’s regime of historicity was above all spectral: during the Renaissance, people were conscious that they were experiencing the end of a world, they perceived history as a cycle of continual returns, they feared the return of the past and of the dead and therefore established ghosts as a “commonplace”, an object of knowledge, an active figure in conflict resolution and a guardian of communities during a period of deep tensions and civil and religious wars.

The Science of Spectres

The book begins with a spectrography, which assesses the significance of ghosts in sources, and gives a very interesting initial observation: ghosts are almost absent from the religious archives of the 16th and 17th centuries. Nothing or virtually nothing remains of their presence in the archives of repression of the ecclesiastical courts. The same is true for those of cults, with the exception of a few outlandish and marginal

¹ Élisabeth Claverie, *Les guerres de la Vierge : une anthropologie des apparitions*, Paris, Gallimard, 2003.

² Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, University of Minnesota Press, 2008 (1997).

³ Denis Crouzet, *Les Guerriers de Dieu. La violence au temps des guerres de religion vers 1525-vers 1610*, Seyssel, Champ Vallon, 1990.

cases. However, the silence of the archives is not a silence of the written word: ghosts proliferated in printed accounts. Although they remained numerous in the traditional breeding ground of devotional literature, they mainly migrated to other genres: collections of “curiosities” (various mixes of extracts deemed exemplary of translated accounts and drawn from the ancient corpus); works of religious controversy, such as that of Lavater (*De Spectris*, 1569) and many other updated collections of best-selling contemporary ghost stories. Caroline Callard highlights the editorial success of ghosts, which, by the end of the Renaissance, had become a common and shared figure in print culture.

Genuine scholars and erudite figures took an interest in this subject, such as Pierre de L'Estoile, who began to collect all the stories he found on the subject from 1601 onwards. Until 1608, he compiled various accounts and numinous stories, although he did not appear to support these “superstitions”. He then acquired Pierre Le Loyer’s *Treatise of Specters* for a large sum of money and read in it the history of the house he had purchased in 1574, which was said to be haunted. Caroline Callard interprets his compilations as an effort to render himself incredulous, to establish as superstitions those beliefs that fascinated him.

Around this time, ghosts also became a subject of the *nova scientia* as “preternatural” phenomena, i.e. that deviated from the order of nature created by God and, as such, were worthy of being interpreted as signs by a science that was developing as a “mantic”: an art of questioning nature. The scientific debate became favourable to spectres following the rediscovery of the writings of Augustine, who was a powerful authority in the 16th century. His treatise *De cura pro mortuis gerenda* became a key text on apparitions, among Catholics and Protestants alike, who used it in opposite ways. In theology, the art of the discernment of spirits (*discretio spirituum*) spread and established its procedures in the ecclesiastical tribunals of the Catholic world.

Renaissance scholars also rediscovered Galen’s humoral theories and incorporated ghosts and apparitions into a new framework of medical interpretation. The rediscovery of Neoplatonic demonology led to the birth of a scientific poetry that requalified a number of declassified beings (fairies, elves, various spirits) and reenchanting the cosmos. It was in this favourable context that Pierre Le Loyer’s project to establish a “science of spectres” (1586-1605) was born, authenticating their presence, distinguishing them from illusion and giving them body and existence. The resulting *Treatise of Specters* was an editorial success and very well received throughout Europe,

becoming a legitimate working tool both for the highest erudite authorities of the Catholic Church and for the jurists of the French Parliaments.

The Infested Worlds

Caroline Callard focuses next on the functions of the ghost during “panic times”. During the Renaissance, ghosts—bearers of bad omens—invaded cities and urban homes, a new factor that, she writes, “highlights an unprecedented spectral topography” (p. 81). Domestic asylum was weakened by the Wars of Religion, the trade crisis and plague epidemics. An imaginary infestation of sites then developed, which, in Bordeaux, a Catholic city, took on a strong religious dimension. Ghosts could be used as either “a machine for converting Huguenots”⁴ or as acceptable grounds for breaking a lease in civil law. For the 16th century was the definitive period in which spectres, whether their presence or the legitimate fear they sparked, gained acceptance in the courts of justice and non-ecclesiastical tribunals. Caroline Callard thus shows that magistrates gave them a legal existence and, during the troubled period of the Wars of Religion, even adopted a clause on spectres that, for a while, blurred the boundary between civil law and theology, before disappearing.

Ghosts also held a unique position within modern families, which had now become nuclear. They became individualised, with a genealogy and a position with regard to the inhabitants of the house. A ghost might represent the figure of the debtor who came asking for payment; that of the messenger who foretold misfortunes; it might also represent an affect and express the permanence of the bond: the sadness of mourning, guilt, absence. Even though both sexes could see ghosts, it was nevertheless women who were thought to be more inclined to observe them. Of these often stigmatised women, it was widows, *benandanti* and pregnant women who were particularly important. For each, Caroline Callard carefully dissects cases that provide subtle clues to a shift in the way people perceived spectres and their powers.

⁴ In Bordeaux, the ghosts spotted by Caroline Callard were generally Catholic and came to haunt and worry the new Protestant occupants. The fear they sparked was part of the conversion movement in Aquitaine, because these ghosts were thought to be souls from Purgatory and thus proved the existence of this central “place” in Catholic pastoral ministry. It should be remembered that Protestants do not believe in Purgatory.

Between Life and Death

This leads to the boundaries between life and death, between the animate and the inanimate and to the various spectral techniques produced in the 16th century. First, there is the question of undertakers and effigies that mimicked the life of the deceased, or funeral masks; as well as the fears that “bad burials” aroused among both Catholics and Protestants. The author examines a particularly striking case of body replacement: a mother who made a rag doll in the likeness of her sick daughter, Gauside, in order to bury it in the place of the girl; the woman was prosecuted for “bodily fraud”, because her action was a sign of both Protestant iconoclasm and the use of devilish tools.⁵

Caroline Callard examines the globalisation of spectres: the belief in ghosts which, from the Renaissance onwards, became one of the universal elements of religions in time and space, at the very foundation of humanism. Here again, ghosts had several uses or functions: they accompanied colonisation in the form of haunting remorse and revealed its injustice. Bartolomé de Las Casas described the haunted city of Isabela in his famous *Historia de las Indias* and told the story of the fate of the first city built by Christopher Columbus, reduced to ruins and a land of ghosts—the ghosts of the city’s founders condemned to wander eternally for having martyred the Indians and devoted their lives to the search for gold, but also the ghosts of the Indians killed without having been converted and who haunted the Christian conscience.

However, ghost stories did help to advance both philosophical and sceptical doubt. The author follows the exposure of several cases of trickery and their effects in the context of the Wars of Religion and religious controversy. These frauds gradually gained visibility at the time of the schism between Catholics and Protestants, and ghosts were brought to life on the theatre stages of the 16th and 17th centuries. In the same way, while doubt about the existence of ghosts was widely taken up and conveyed by natural philosophy, ghost stories were the delight of *heteroclitia*, “triumphs” and “wonders”—those collections and corpora of apparitions that shifted away from the elitist terrain of religious controversy to spread to the more popular lands of works of piety and devotion. Ghosts also had their uses in the political life of the time: on 8th September 1598, Henry IV encountered the “Grand Veneur” at Fontainebleau, a kind of king of the army of the dead. By appearing to him, the ghost

⁵ Protestants rejected the use of effigies in funerals. The use of dummy corpses was considered superstition.

recognised him as the heir of the kingdom and forged the image of a king who anticipated his own death in a period of regicidal anguish. In lampoons, ghosts also held places of honour and came to haunt and perturb the powerful, especially Concini's ghost who reappeared periodically. Finally, the kings of France, following in the footsteps of Louis XII, become powerful exorcists by chasing ghosts out of the Château de Bicêtre.

From the Spectral to the Spectacle

The book ends with a careful examination of one last fascinating case, which links the appearance of spectres and the history of printing. It involves an Englishman, Nicholas Culpeper, a contemporary of the Civil War and best-selling author of several books on medical popularisation and astrological prognoses available at the London artisans' exchange. His two publishers, Peter Cole and Nathaniel Brook, shared his works and published them profitably. When he died in 1654, the two publishers used his ghost, now a ghostwriter, to continue publishing new books and fuelling scientific controversy.

However, the energy surrounding ghosts tended to decline towards the last quarter of the 17th century, for three primary reasons. First, the animistic nature of the early Renaissance gave way to a nature-machine that now obeyed the laws of cause and effect. Second, the specialisation and empowerment of knowledge led to a great sharing of beings and things where there was no longer room for ghosts. Finally, the pacification of the West made it less useful to resort to ghosts as a means of channelling feelings of fear. The ghost clause disappeared from the courts of justice. Hauntings ceased to be a supernatural manifestation and an anthropological fact.

The category of the "preternatural" also disappeared. The spectre became a remnant of paganism. From then on, all that remained was for it to become a figure of controversy and to migrate to other media such as the magic lantern and phantasmagoria shows. Things thus came full circle. Ghosts did not leave the world; instead, they became increasingly visible and spectacular. This was not about the disenchantment of the world, but a migration of ghosts. It was not exorcism, but a mutation of the regime of spectrality that was reconstructed during the Enlightenment.

First published in *laviedesidees.fr*, 30 January 2020.

Translated from the French by Susannah Dale.

Published in *booksandideas.net*, 2 April 2020.