



MUSEUM DE LAKENHAL PRESENTS

GLOBAL IMAGINATIONS

DE MEELFABRIEK LEIDEN | 27.06.15 - 04.10.15 | GLOBALIMAGINATIONS.COM

GLOBAL HAUNTINGS

Written version of dr. Esther Peeren's lecture for the symposium 'How to visualize an interconnected world' (25 September 2015)

I have spent a lot of time over the past years thinking about ghosts and haunting, not as actual phenomena involving the dead coming back to life but as metaphors able to illuminate relations between past, present and future, and between different localities and differently positioned subjects and communities in our globalizing world.¹ My primary objective has been to emphasize that it is essential, whenever we refer to something as “spectral,” “ghostly” or “haunting,” which is sometimes too easily done, to specify what exactly is meant by this. After all, ghosts and haunting exist in culturally and historically variable forms, fulfilling many different functions and evoking a range of responses, from fear, rejection and exorcism to respect, affection and fascination.

At the same time, it is the very multiplicity of meanings and associations ghosts and haunting can have, and the ambivalence that characterizes their most widespread uses – as referring to what exists in-between life and death, in-between materiality and immateriality, in-between visibility and invisibility, and in-between the powerful and the powerless – that makes them so productive as tools to analyze a process like globalization that shares this ambivalence, remaining to some extent ungraspable even as its effects are palpable across the world.

In the context of the Global Imaginations exhibition – and, more specifically, the work of Ghana ThinkThink – what forms of global haunting can we distinguish, how are they produced and what are their effects? To answer these questions, it is first of all important to point out that a haunting (whether local or global) presupposes a ghost capable of acting. This is not self-evident: as Hollywood teaches us, not all ghosts haunt. Here, I am thinking of seminal ghost films like *Beetlejuice*, in which a recently dead couple has to learn how to haunt, and *Ghost*, in which Patrick Swayze, playing the titular phantom, at first is unable to affect the world of the living. Consequently, before asking what haunts the globalizing world, it is vital to ask what does not haunt it and what is, therefore, reduced to the status of an impotent ghost incapable of acting out

¹ See *Popular Ghosts: The Haunted Spaces of Everyday Culture* (2010), *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory* (2013) and *The Spectral Metaphor: Living Ghosts and the Agency of Invisibility* (2014).

PARTNERS





MUSEUM DE LAKENHAL PRESENTS

GLOBAL IMAGINATIONS

DE MEELFABRIEK LEIDEN | 27.06.15 - 04.10.15 | GLOBALIMAGINATIONS.COM

to provoke a reaction. At its most extreme, this status marks the sheer exploitability and expendability of what Achille Mbembe calls the “living dead,” who are produced by necropolitical regimes as “wandering subjects” that “work for life” and are always under threat of dismemberment and death.²

The next question, then, is how subjects that, under contemporary conditions of globalization, are not recognized as having agency may nevertheless come to haunt. The primary requirement is for them to be noticed rather than overlooked, but noticed in a way that does not mark them as merely disposable. Thus, becoming visible alone is not enough; to haunt in an insistent manner that cannot be ignored, these subjects must be seen as effectively doing or demanding something or as legitimately requiring help. Appearing and coming to haunt as a victim, appealing to empathy, generosity or guilt, can be powerful, as the recent case of the photograph of the drowned Syrian boy Aylan Kurdi shows.³ Yet a far more powerful position is to come to haunt not as a ghost asking for help (which defers agency to the haunted, who can choose whether and how to respond) but as a ghost capable, in its own right, of revealing a different kind of knowledge or of forcing the haunted, through fright or fascination, to take responsibility for what they do not want to see or acknowledge, such as the persistent inequalities of the globalizing world and their roots in histories of exploitation that cannot simply be consigned to a closed off past.

To me, it is this latter type of active haunting – in the form of revealing a different kind of knowledge and enforcing responsibility for disavowals – that Ghana ThinkThank’s installation at the Global Imaginations exhibition stages. It does this by enforcing a disjuncting shift in perspective – or, as I call it in my book *The Spectral Metaphor*, following cultural theorist Mieke Bal, a *refocalization*. By making us look from a different point of view, this refocalization exposes and indicts the dominant, uni-directional mode of looking from the so-called “developed” world at the so-called “developing” world. Ghana ThinkThank’s is not the only artwork in the Global Imaginations exhibition that uses refocalization: changing and multiplying perspectives to undermine the idea that there can be a single perspective of or on globalization is a concern also in Taryn Simon’s *Image Atlas* (which uses a search machine to expose how people in different countries see the world differently), Romuald Hazoumè’s *NGO SBOP* (which imagines an NGO

² See Mbembe’s articles “Life, Sovereignty, and Terror in the Fiction of Amos Tutuola” (2003) and “Necropolitics” (2003).

³ See for example, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/aylan-kurdi-and-the-photos-that-change-history-1442002594>.

PARTNERS



SUPPORTED BY





MUSEUM DE LAKENHAL PRESENTS

GLOBAL IMAGINATIONS

DE MEELFABRIEK LEIDEN | 27.06.15 - 04.10.15 | GLOBALIMAGINATIONS.COM

dedicated to helping western people in peril) and Tsang Kin-Wah's *The Fourth Seal – HE Is To No Purpose And HE Wants To Die For The Second Time* (in which the use of pronouns gradually implicates the viewer – by addressing her as YOU – and, in its imposing, engulfing (dare I say haunting) intensification of the entanglement between the snaking phrases, dissolves the line between self and other: YOU ARE THE OTHERS).

Ghana ThinkThank's slogan – “developing the first world” – moves from the familiar discourse of “developing the developing world” (which, essentially, allows the developing world to haunt the developed world only as a victim asking for help) to an inverse discourse in which the developing world offers the developed world not labor and natural resources, as under colonial and neocolonial exploitation, but advice marked by the corporate term “think thank” as valuable, cutting-edge expertise, something, under the familiar discourse, the developing world is thought to lack.

The description of Ghana ThinkThank as a “globally distributed network” – in its deliberate adoption of the language of the transnational corporation – positions the developing world as participating in globalization instead of being situated at its periphery or even exteriority, while also pointing to the way the technological and corporate networks we usually associate with globalization are shadowed by and predicated on disavowed, spectralized networks of migration, exploitation, war and poverty.

By featuring multiple think thanks providing different answers to the same questions, Ghana ThinkThank also challenges the way the developing world tends to be seen as an undifferentiated whole characterized by sweeping, intractable problems such as poverty and corruption that should, by now, have been superseded. Rather than as a monolithic ghost vexingly keeping globalization from reaching its promised future of full velocity and spatial saturation, Ghana ThinkThank makes the developing world appear as what Jacques Derrida, in *Specters of Marx*, identifies as the spectral *plus d'un* or “more than one/no more one”: as multiple, heterogeneous and therefore specific in each of its apparitions. Thus, the locations of the different think thanks and the trajectories of their participants – as locals, migrants or refugees – matter and are seen to feed into the resolutions produced, which, in Walter Mignolo's terms, might be seen as forms of

PARTNERS



De Meelfabriek
Living, working and recreation in the city of Leiden

SUPPORTED BY



FONDS21



CULTUURFONDS LEIDEN



BankGiroLoterij
CULTUUR. MAAKT JE BETER.



Leiden





MUSEUM DE LAKENHAL PRESENTS

GLOBAL IMAGINATIONS

DE MEELFABRIEK LEIDEN | 27.06.15 - 04.10.15 | GLOBALIMAGINATIONS.COM

decolonizing knowledge that challenge the so-called West's monopoly on producing what counts and what does not count as knowledge.⁴

The fact that Ghana ThinkThink does not stop at asking for solutions, but also seeks to implement them underlines that we are dealing with an active haunting: just like conjuring a ghost is never non-committal and the advice of corporate consultancies can, once given and paid for, not easily be ignored, putting in a question to the think thanks commits one to listening to the responses. The step to implementation also confirms that this is not an active haunting deriving its power from an installed fear, but one founded on a desire for "other" knowledge, which, more than as an exotic curiosity is accepted as applying to the self (paralleling the way Victorian spiritualism was geared towards contacting ghosts in order to find out about what was waiting in the afterlife).

What makes the Leiden installation so effective as an active haunting, in my view, is the fact that the change in perspective or refocalization is, first of all, not taken for granted or rendered into a smooth, comfortable experience. Instead, it is explicitly presented as a reversed, unusual and literally "exterior" perspective in the container, which is situated at the periphery of the exhibition and features an eerie display of high-tech media, sparse furniture, what appears like rubbish and a mysterious cat. Second, the change in perspective does not remain at the level of mere play, but is reflected upon in the questions and answers featured on the screens, as well as being materialized in the form of the *Monument to the Dutch*. The latter not only asks Dutch visitors to look to their own past of tolerance (even though this past was perhaps not as tolerant as we like to think) in order to combat present-day islamophobia, but also to take on the role of a guest faced with unfamiliar customs demanding respect rather than identifying as the host (whether protective, as when sheltering Anne Frank, or demanding, as when asking immigrants to assimilate). In this way, the installation moves viewers to take responsibility for why the reversed perspective of the developing on the developed world, of migrants on our society, of guests on hosts, despite being possible and making perfect sense when it is taken, is, outside the exhibition, so readily foreclosed.

To sum up, just like the shock caused by the change in perspective proposed by films like *The Others* and *The Sixth Sense*, in which the ones who seem to be haunted are revealed to be the

PARTNERS



SUPPORTED BY



⁴ See Mignolo's "The Geopolitics of Knowledge and the Colonial Difference" (2002).



MUSEUM DE LAKENHAL PRESENTS

GLOBAL IMAGINATIONS

DE MEELFABRIEK LEIDEN | 27.06.15 - 04.10.15 | GLOBALIMAGINATIONS.COM

ghosts, Ghana ThinkThank's deliberate reversal surprises and, I want to suggest, effectively shames those of us in the "first" world used to thinking of people from the "developing" world only as undifferentiated victims or threats.

This shaming, to me, is most effectively enacted through the installation's foregrounding of two rather self-righteous questions that take the notion of "first-world problems" literally: "who am I to send my problems to people in countries that are so much poorer than the Netherlands" and "who are we to send our stupid little problems to they who have such serious problems." Although these questions show an awareness of global inequalities, they also constitute refusals to entertain the notion that the think thanks may indeed have something to offer. As such, they work to foreclose the change in perspective that would allow an active haunting to occur: the "I" and the "we" situated in the developed world remain central rather than being displaced. By prominently featuring these questions and the answers provided by the think thanks – which subtly point out their arrogance and condescension – Ghana ThinkThank forces visitors to reflect upon them and to register the impulse to ask them as missing the point.

Exhibitions that actively haunt the visitor – not in a vein of trivial entertainment, as the historical ghost tours that now exist in almost every city as a tourist attraction do, but in a way that truly disturbs and lingers long after one's visit – are what we need more of. What makes the Global Imaginations exhibition such a good example of this are not just the artworks included and the unsettling refocalizations they achieve, but also the location of the Meelfabriek, which is haunted both by its past as a factory (at the moment still present in a tangible, disjuncting way) and by its gentrified future, which needs to be seen in a global context in which similar sites all over the world become sterilized, virtually indistinguishable spaces where history does not really haunt but has been domesticated, commodified and financialized, and where art is also in danger of losing its haunting force as creativity is redefined as a profit-generating industry.⁵

⁵ I want to thank Anke Bangma, Wayne Modest and Kitty Zijlmans for involving me in the "Global Imaginations: How to Visualize an Interconnected World" workshop at the Research Center for Material Culture on 25 September 2015. I am also grateful to Christopher Robbins and John Ewing of Ghana ThinkThank for their openness to thinking their work through the perspective of spectrality.

PARTNERS



SUPPORTED BY





MUSEUM DE LAKENHAL PRESENTS

GLOBAL IMAGINATIONS

DE MEELFABRIEK LEIDEN | 27.06.15 - 04.10.15 | GLOBALIMAGINATIONS.COM

About the speaker:

Esther Peeren is Associate Professor of Globalisation Studies at the Media Studies Department of the University of Amsterdam. She is also vice-director of the Amsterdam Centre for Globalisation Studies (ACGS - <http://acgs.uva.nl>) and vice-director of the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis (ASCA - <http://asca.uva.nl>).

Works Cited

Blanco, María del Pilar, and Esther Peeren (ed.). *Popular Ghosts: The Haunted Spaces of Everyday Culture*. New York: Continuum, 2010.

---. *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2013.

Derrida, Jacques. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, & the New International*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. New York and London: Routledge, 1994.

Mbembe, Achille. "Life, Sovereignty, and Terror in the Fiction of Amos Tutuola." *Research in African Literatures* 34.4 (2003): 1-26.

---. "Necropolitics." *Public Culture* 15.1 (2003): 11-40.

Mignolo, Walter. "The Geopolitics of Knowledge and the Colonial Difference." *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 101.1 (2002): 57-96.

Peeren, Esther. *The Spectral Metaphor: Living Ghosts and the Agency of Invisibility*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

PARTNERS



De Meelfabriek
Living, working and recreation in the city of Leiden

SUPPORTED BY



FONDS21



CULTUURFONDS LEIDEN



BankGiroLoterij
CULTUUR MAAKT JE RIJKER



Leiden

