Spectres of the Imagination:
A Post-Phenomenological Perspective
on the Filmic Image and its Uses

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Abstract

The article reconsiders the joint development of a theory of the moving images by Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler. Their theory highlights the spectrality of moving images, and formulates a hypothesis about its meaning for the filmic experience. This meaning has especially to do with the way imagination elaborates the sense of images flowing on the screen: it is an effect of the work of imagination synthesizing the visual experience, and not a "special effect" added to a special genre of movies. Filmmakers make accordingly specters appear on the screen as a signature of their reflection upon the action of imagination through the filmic narration.

Keywords: Derrida; Stiegler; Spectrality of images; Imagination; American Jewish cinema.

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1   Introduction

A ghost haunts images.[1] This idea lies at the heart of Jacques Derrida's reflection on photography, cinema, television, and the audiovisual media more broadly (see Derrida and Stiegler 2002). It goes without saying that the recording of moving images draws the attention of a philosopher so engaged with the issue of writing. Compelling reasons exist to argue that all images, not merely those technically registered, are haunted by ghosts. Painting, too, reveals the presence of ghosts: portraits serve as a particular instance of this phenomenon. The spirits of ancestors linger within their portraits: the coexistence of both portraits and ghosts in old family manors has become a cliché of the gothic imagination. The British artist Francis Bacon painted a series of popes inspired by Diego Velasquez's portrait of Innocentius X. According to a well-established tradition, the pope sits on a chair as if he were occupied with state affairs in Velasquez's portrait. In many of Bacon's paintings, the pope's figure appears as a ghost who weeps and longs to escape the cage in which he is trapped. Curiously enough, it seems that Bacon never visited the Doria Pamphilj Gallery in Rome, where Velasquez's portrait is displayed. Bacon only saw photographic reproductions of the painting. It appears that Innocentius X was not satisfied with Velasquez's work, which he found too realistic. Arguably, Bacon's ghostly figures unveil a spectrality lying behind Velasquez's alleged realism: the ghost of the real pope, who rejects his ideal double, is now visible.[2]

Derrida develops a semantics of spectrality, illustrating the extent to which it overlaps with the philosophical vocabulary of vision. Phantom, he writes, is etymologically linked to the Greek verb *phainesthai*, which means 'to appear', and does not refer solely to supernatural apparitions (in Derrida and Stiegler 2002: 115). It shares the same etymology as the word 'phenomenon'. The same can be said of the word 'spectre' regarding its Latin origin. The verb *spectare* means 'to look at' or 'to observe'. The word 'spectacle' derives from this verb. Likewise, the word 'respect' is derived from it: respecting something means to keep it under one's gaze. The exploration of etymologies could continue. In German, the word Geist means 'spirit' in a both theological and aesthetic sense. However, the same word also signifies 'mind'. The same observation could be made about the French word esprit. Consequently, the boundaries of the spectrality of images are vast. Derrida is particularly interested in photography, cinema, television, and other audiovisual media, and this interest leads his reflection upon the spectrality of images.[3]

Derrida's reflection on spectrality actually begins prior to *Echographies of Television*, with a critical interpretation of Marx's political philosophy (see Derrida 2006). The first spectre addressed by Derrida is the "spectre of Communism" invoked by Marx and Engels in the opening line of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. In this context, the spectre represents the "messianicity" of the revolutionary event (Derrida and Stiegler 2002: 127). However, Derrida identifies a contradiction in Marx and Engels' discourse on revolution. The ultimate goal of the revolution is the establishment of a classless society. Marx and Engels seem to express a positivist faith in the progressive force of the communist movement, envisioning that, with its triumph, all phantoms of the past will vanish. Yet this total disappearance of the past would also entail the erasure of the spectre of the revolution itself. Derrida, by contrast, maintains that messianicity is the spectral core of the revolutionary impulse, and that it remains irreducible as long as revolution is—and must be—an unceasing commitment of humankind. We should not envision a world beyond the end of the revolution. Rather, the spectre of messianic transformation should continue to haunt our collective imagination, insofar as we remain invested in the future of the future.

The emphasis on the irreducibility of the messianic force of revolution relates to Derrida's peculiar conception of power and politics. The interpretation of words again serves as a means for formulating philosophical remarks. Spectre (*spectre* in French), scepter (*sceptre*), and respect (the same in French) are anagrams of each other (in Derrida and Stiegler 2002: 124). The significance of this remark is that these words pertain to the same object and are considered from different perspectives: power, obedience, and representation are various facets of the same phenomenon. An exemplary illustration of their coalescence is the famous scene of the

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1.   By using the word 'image' instead of 'picture', my aim is to highlight its double nature, both mental and material. For this conception of the image, see Garroni 2005.

2.   For an interpretation of Bacon's painting, see Deleuze 2005.

3.   For an interpretation of Derrida's thought on the arts: see Feyles 2018; Vitale 2008.

apparition of the father's ghost in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. It is night: Horatio and Marcellus, fellows of Prince Hamlet, encounter the ghost of his father, the king who has recently passed away, in the surroundings of Elsinore castle. The king reveals to them the truth about his death and how his brother Claudius managed to usurp power by marrying Queen Gertrude, his widow and Hamlet's mother. The apparition of the ghost serves as a message for Hamlet, urging him to seek revenge for the murder and claim the throne. From Hamlet's perspective, obedience to the father's authority would coincide with the desire for power.

However, Derrida points out that Hamlet's hesitation is one of the hallmarks of the tragedy. Consequently, he argues that the prince, "is very anxious to know whether the witnesses who saw his father, Marcellus and Horatio, saw his eyes" (in Derrida and Stiegler 2002: 121). The question is precisely whether the king's ghost, who wears his armour and helmet, kept the visor up during his appearance. But Derrida remarks that the question is irrelevant: the spectre does not need to show his eyes to tell the truth. According to Derrida, the "visor effect" rather refers to the transcendental power of the ghost, to whom belongs the right of dictating commandments to the alive ones: the "spectre enjoys the right of absolute inspection. He is the right of inspection itself" (ibidem).

The spectre's authority unilaterally imposes the truth of power and the power of truth. The lack of reciprocity in the gazes is but the sign that scepter, respect, and spectre are but one entity. Louis Marin (Marin 2002)[4] makes a likely remark about the representation of King Louis XIV of France (*le Roi soleil*). He refers, among other works of art, to the tapestry Charles Le Brun realised for Versailles. In one piece, the king is portrayed while asking Philippe IV, the king of Spain, for the Infanta's hand. Marin remarks that the king does not look at the beholder, whilst the figure beside him, Monsieur Royal, Louis' brother, looks directly at the beholder and points to the king with his finger. Another figure shows its back to the beholder, holding a hat his hand. This figure exemplifies the attitude of respect one should maintain in front of the king. The beholder is, in fact, the king's subject and must behave accordingly. Conversely, the king has the right to ignore the beholder's presence because he can display indifference and impassibility as signs of his absolute power. The beholder's gaze cannot enjoy the reciprocity of the king's gaze because their relationship is an asymmetrical relationship of power.

Let us revisit the play *Hamlet*. Upon being informed of the appearance of his father's ghost, Hamlet seeks proof and inquires whether the witnesses could perceive his gaze. If they could do so, he would still doubt the apparition's authenticity; consequently, he would dismiss its mandate. Hamlet challenges the logic underlying the representation of authority while simultaneously adopting the same rationale to assert his claim to the throne. The tragedy of the represented situation lies in this contradiction: one must place trust in the ghost of past authority to claim power, simultaneously aware of the fragility of every ghostly manifestation.

2   Politics of Spectres

The issue of registration has only been raised so far. However, analysing the spectral logic of power can help to introduce it. Registered images are widely employed to support political regimes and ideologies. Does the feature of being registered matter for the political use of these images? A joke is attributed to the late Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein. He used to deliver endless speeches on the state TV channel. He is said to have stated once that Iraqi families could also turn off the television and display his picture on the screen. On one hand, the joke assimilates television to photography: the screen becomes the surface of a still portrait. On the other hand, it suggests that photography holds the same networking power as television. Statues of monarchs were usually erected in the principal square of the capital. The president's or king's portrait typically hangs on the wall of every public institution in a nation. However, the leader's image can also infiltrate private domestic spaces through television. Hussein's alleged remark reflects a sort of mutual remediation. This political use of television aims to exploit its pervasiveness. At the same time, it seeks to prevent the emergence of contingency, counterfeiting, and negation of television's character as a live spectacle.

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4.   Derrida and Marin were friends. The former wrote for the latter one of his philosophical 'obituaries', then published as a volume in *Chaque Lois unique, la fin du monde* (Derrida 20023).

Videograms of a Revolution is a documentary in which Harun Farocki, along with the Romanian filmmaker Andrei Ujica, collects, analyses, and composes various materials concerning the collapse of the Communist regime in Romania.[5] The documentary opens with a video from the Romanian State TV channel, where the dictator Nicolae Ceausescu delivers a speech to a crowd gathered in the square in front of the balcony of the Presidential Palace. Unexpectedly, the crowd begins to protest loudly and violently, forcing Ceausescu to pause his speech several times. This marks the eruption of contingency. The unforeseen event has a destabilising effect, to the extent that the reactions of the State TV channel appear uncertain and hesitant. The camera is firstly directed to another area of the scene to hide the protests against the leader. However, the sound remains audible, allowing the viewer to imagine what is transpiring. Ultimately, the State TV channel decides to cease the live coverage of the presidential speech.

The irruption of contingency serves as a fil rouge in Derrida's contemplation of the logic of historical events. His thoughts on television are profoundly influenced by the event of the First Gulf War. This event caught the attention of several philosophers: no war had previously experienced live television coverage before it. TV screens displayed the bombing of Baghdad to the world. There was also a gamification effect; the technologies available at the time rendered the images reminiscent of a video game graphic. Baudrillard referred to 'simulacra' of reality (Baudrillard 1994). Derrida questioned whether television genuinely witnessed the event or merely reproduced it artificially (in Derrida and Stiegler 2002). Both philosophers are concerned with exploring what kind of object the spectator observes on the screen and the conditions under which this object can be conveyed to others.

Communicating experiences requires, implicitly or explicitly, an intersubjective background. This communicative feature is inherent to the very nature of having experiences, as an experience always entails a meaning that can, at least virtually, be shared with others (see Garroni 2005). The issue of witness points out to the authenticity and variety of our experiences. In *The Storyteller*, Walter Benjamin remarks on how far the soldiers who survived the First World War had poor experiences recounting wartime (see Benjamin 2015): the shock of the war literally annihilated their ability to have experiences and to share them with others. The televisual screen plays a similar role regarding the spectator's virtual involvement in a war occurring on another continent.

3 Bernard Stiegler on Image

Images projected or broadcast on a screen appear as ghosts: in that sense, they primarily refer not to reality as such, but to the way our imaginations elaborate it. Derrida reflects upon this issue in *Artefactuality*, an essay published in the volume *Echographies of Television*. This book also collects interviews conducted by Bernard Stiegler with Derrida, as well as an essay by Stiegler himself. The book appeared in 1996. Stiegler had started his principal philosophical enterprise only two years before: the series of volumes composing his masterpiece, *La technique et le temps*. The essay published on the book coauthored with Derrida is entitled *The Discrete Image*. It can be read as an answer to Derrida's remarks on the spectrality of images and the attempt to formulate a new theory of images. Stiegler indeed writes that the discovery of digital technologies is a "chance, if it can be seized, to develop a culture of *reception*" (Derrida and Stiegler 2002: 162-163). He is concerned with the reception of images; his focus is on the experience of images, not on their production. He does not speak of interpretation, which would imply a hermeneutical framework; rather, he considers the aesthetic, i.e. sensory and imaginative, moment of our experience. His image theory is a theory of reception.

Addressing the reception issue in literary theory from the late 1970s, Umberto Eco posits that we should consider an *intentio lectoris* alongside the well-known *intentio auctoris* and *intentio operis* (Eco 1979). As far as images are concerned, we should discuss intentio spectatoris. The fundamental issue remains the same: both images and literary texts are neither neutral nor transparent objects. Rather, they possess opaque surfaces, from which meaning can only emerge through the interpretation of their reception. My assertion is that Stiegler's focus on the type of reflection inherent in the digital technologies of visualisation relates to the spectrality of images.

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5.   For an analysis of this movie see Cecchi 2019.

Derrida has already claimed the implication of their spectrality with the issue of witness. Stiegler makes a step forward: spectrality is intertwined with the transcendental conditions of vision, and the role of imagination in the act of vision. Stiegler so brings Derrida's reflection back to its Kantian and phenomenological sources. No transcendental condition is required to describe vision's psychological and physiological functioning. Transcendental conditions are needed only when we correlate vision to the possibility of knowing reality. In this case, we consider the criteria for making sense of our experience in a way other than another. Spectrality would therefore be a way of making sense of images, or rather, a secondary effect of our need for sense as cognitive beings. I speak of a secondary effect because we deal here with the fact that imagination, in a transcendental perspective, mediates between mind and reality. The spectrality of images reflectively makes sense of this mediation.

Unlike Derrida, Stiegler is more interested in the Latin root of spectrality than in its Greek counterpart. Images are, first and foremost, *spectra*. Our minds do not produce them on a screen after configuring them fully. Projection is part of the process by which images are configured, becoming a space of negotiation between the mind and reality. At the very beginning of his essay, Stiegler argues that an "image in general does not exist" (in Derrida and Stiegler 2002: 147). Images take shape through a process dominated by two faculties in particular: imagination and memory. "There is neither image nor imagination without memory," he writes, "nor any memory that would be originally objective. The question of the image is therefore also and indissolubly that of the trace and inscription: a question of writing in the broad sense" (in Derrida and Stiegler 2002: 148). As I mentioned earlier, Stiegler moves towards a transcendental understanding of images. This stance brings him at least partially outside the boundaries of Derrida's perspective. For instance, the dialectic of imagination and memory recalls Paul Ricoeur's account of the same issue (Ricoeur 2004).

No raw inscription can genuinely be considered a trace if no one reconstructs its narrative framework: let us think of the interpretive work undertaken by Georges Didi-Huberman on the images captured by the members of a *Sonderkommando* using a stolen photographic device (Didi-Huberman 2012). Conversely, no purely creative narrative can be effective if it disregards all references to memory. A fictional narrative may serve as an attempt to preserve the memory of an event after the witnesses have vanished. Consider László Nemes' film *Son of Saul*. The camera's usage in this film seeks to reproduce a prisoner's unstable and limited perception within a camp, shaped by the inhuman conditions they endure. This reflects the perception evident in the images analysed by Didi-Huberman. In this sense, the exchange between archive and fiction fosters a new understanding of the past.

Images oscillate between memory and imagination, making their spectrality a transcendental issue. One must distinguish imagination from imagery. Stiegler argues that there is no "transcendental imagery" (in Derrida and Stiegler 2002: 147). In other words, imagination possesses no innate repertoire of clichés and types through which we can make sense of our experiences. The encounter between the screen and the spectator actually engenders the imagery evoked by a movie or TV series. The image evokes the "hallucinatory haunting or coming back (*revenance*) of the phantasm" (in Derrida and Stiegler 2002: 148) that occurs when spectators project their unconscious onto the screen. Spectrality is an effect of projection and does not preexist it. Reception elaborates this effect; through reception, spectators refine the projection made onto the image, often unconsciously. Imagery is merely a secondary effect. We should therefore speak of an *intentio spectri*, which is irreducible to both the *intentio auctoris* and the *intentio spectatoris*. This new intentionality does not correspond to the *intentio operis*, as an image possesses a life of its own, both inside and outside the work of art for which it was intended or in which it is reused. Consider, for instance, found footage movies. An image of a mass parade in the Soviet Union may be taken from Dziga Vertov's *Three Songs About Lenin* and inserted into Marco Bellocchio's movie *Buongiorno, notte*. This image serves simultaneously as a piece of propaganda, a historical document, and a display of the filmmaker's revolutionary imagination. Images are spectral insofar as they represent a spectrum of different experiences. Generally, an image plays a transcendental function at various levels, revealing a corresponding spectrality. The aesthetic effect of an image is also spectral as it evokes a "*remanence*" beyond its actual sense (in Derrida and Stiegler 2002: 148).

The reuse of images in different contexts demonstrates how the spectrality of an image is mainly independent of the artist's or spectator's psychology. Spectrality arises when images mediate between the mind and reality. Derrida regarded the archiving process of images, as well as texts, as the generative moment of sense, and

he neutralised any transcendental perspective. Stiegler rehabilitates this perspective in his reflections on the dialectic of memory and imagination. These two faculties work together to shape our experience as well as our identities as beings living and experiencing.

Let us consider a concrete case. Several American filmmakers have dealt with their Jewish legacy, transforming their cultural identity into an experience shareable with a broader audience. The question is how far a spectator is able to perceive the Jewishness haunting the films of filmmakers such as Woody Allen, Mel Brooks, or Joel and Ethan Coen. The case of Mel Brooks's film *Frankenstein Jr* exemplifies this kind of cultural spectrality. The film is full of references to the Ashkenazi background shared by many American Jews (Warshow 2002): the gothic framework of the story is likely employed to make sense of this background by evoking an imaginary homeland of the Jewish American community. The same could probably be said of Roman Polanski's film *The Fearless Killers of Vampires*. These films are both zany comedies and satires of the Gothic genre. The homeland evoked in these films is spectral as far as Ashkenazi Jews may come from different countries: Germany, Poland, Russia, Ukraine, and Hungary, among others. Ashkenazi Jews consequently have varied historical backgrounds, which sometimes fade away in their cinematic representation. They maintain the memory of a more or less imaginary Ashkenazi homeland while shaping a new Jewish identity in their new American homeland. One of the most famous gags in *Frankenstein Jr* indeed deals with the idiosyncrasies of Jewish Americans regarding their European origins. Dr Frankenstein travels to Transylvania to visit the castle inherited from his uncle, Baron von Frankenstein. Upon his arrival, he is welcomed by Igor, the butler, who addresses his new master with the correct German pronunciation of the doctor's family name. However, Dr Frankenstein corrects him, insisting on the American pronunciation. An American spectator would immediately grasp the satirical reference to a typical idiosyncrasy of many American Jews and, generally speaking, of many Americans with European origins. Yet surprisingly, the gag is understood worldwide as amusing nonsense. The remainder of the gag supports this reception. Igor reacts to Dr Frankenstein's peculiar claim, stating that the correct pronunciation of his own first name is not the Slavic but the American one. The spectrality of the gag expands to the extent of exceeding the representation of a specific idiosyncrasy, becoming an exemplary case of the typically Jewish nonsense humour.

The spectrality of images is therefore positional rather than ontological. In other words, one should not consider whether the subject of an image is illusory or real. Rather, one should be concerned with the collocation and function of the spectre within the image. In *Frankenstein Jr*, the spectre of Baron von Frankenstein represents the controversial relationship of American Jews with their European origins. This is most probably the *intentio actoris*. The *intentio spectatoris* is unstable, as understanding the gag's meaning can oscillate. The *intentio operis* is to present a parade of Jewish humour. Despite the comical tone of the film, the *intentio spectri* is particularly meditative, as it highlights the floating nature of our identities.

A symbol of this floating character is Igor's hump. During the gag of Dr Frankenstein's first meeting with Igor, the doctor accidentally touches the butler's hump. Feeling sorry for the accident, he as a surgeon proposes to operate on Igor's hump. Quite astonished, the butler asks the doctor which hump he is referring to. Dr Frankenstein is genuinely surprised and believes Igor merely negates his deformity. The gag of the hump becomes a refrain throughout the film: to the doctor's increasing astonishment, Igor's hump sometimes corresponds to the right shoulder and at other times to the left. The answer to the enigma is that Igor has no hump. Rather, it is the horn he plays at the end of the film in a duet with Dr Frankenstein. The horn, brought under the mantle, lies indifferently on either the right or left shoulder, appearing like a hump. It is the spectre of a hump, which in fact evokes the floating nature of our identities and the possibility of revealing it.

4   Transcendental Spectres

As we have seen above, the polysemy of an image is entangled with its spectrality. It appears as the "remanence" made visible by the actual sense of an image. This idea brings us back to the transcendental meaning of images, their reference to a "transcendental *imagination*" capable of mediating between mind and reality (in Derrida and Stiegler 2002: 147). Although Stiegler declares that he will not deal with this issue, he quickly sketches his idea of transcendental imagination: "without the mental image, he writes, there is not, has never been, and will never be an image-object [...], *reciprocally*, without the objective image, despite what one might think,

there is not, has never been and will never be a mental image: the mental image is always the *return* of some image-object" (in Derrida and Stiegler 2002: 148).

The circularity between mental and objective image is clearer if we assume the concept of "hypomnesis" developed in the trilogy of *La technique et le temps* (Stiegler 2018; see Feyles 2013). In summary, Stiegler reevaluates Husserl's conception of time, which is fundamental for understanding the logic of experience. Perception and reminiscence provide the matter of experience: they are the two essential "retentions" operated by our mind during the course of experience. The anticipation of the future serves as the purpose of these retentions of present and past experiences. Experience results from the dialectic of retentions and "protentions". The cognitive agency of our expertise relies on this ability to be open to the future.

However, Stiegler argues that we must also consider the existence of a third retention, the "hypomnesis," which concerns the externalisation of memory. The issue has already been addressed by Derrida (Derrida 2017), and it has led to the definition of an original concept of archive. Stiegler develops the argument from a transcendental perspective. Images, like signs, reveal the differences among the various aspects of reality. They operate differently. Images affect a "*systematic discretisation of movement*" and "*grammaticalisation of the visible*" (in Derrida and Stiegler 2002: 148-149). This also serves as a way of describing how, according to Kant, imagination schematises experience for the sake of cognition.[6]

Spectrality displays the features highlighted by an image in the object: these features appear as differences inscribed in and through the images produced by the mind. Imagination is a synthetic, not an analytical faculty; it maintains awareness of the continuity of reality. Differences belong to this continuum while simultaneously denoting discontinuities, which confer meaningfulness to the individual aspects of reality. Spectrality is, therefore, a mode of presenting reality as a superposition of various interpretive layers (Kirchmayr 2024). It is not a distortion of the imagination's work as this faculty grapples with the temporality of experience and marks its differences within the continuum of reality. Spectrality is an effect of this process. Its peculiarity lies in its seeming to dismantle the continuum of reality. Past, present, and future invade each other's space in the spectral experience: past memories reappear as revenants; expectations for the future assume angelic or demonic aspects; the present is but a battlefield of supernatural forces. However, spectrality is merely an effect of the grammaticalisation of experience. The gaze results from this grammaticalisation, as it is not reducible to retinal vision but foregrounds the accurate interpretation of reality.

I endeavoured to describe how a filmic use of spectrality aims to highlight the effects of grammaticalisation. Grammaticalisation supplies the imagination with the background for elaborating reality. Films make this process visible to empower the identification of reality with the objective of the camera, and the potential to identify this objective with a human gaze. In fact, a movie camera is capable of interpreting a variety of different gazes. The camera is, therefore, a spectral apparatus through which the filmmaker can display the negotiation between reality and mind concerning the sense of our experience. A spectral emergence is an effect of this negotiation, manifested in the temporal features of experience, where past, present, and future embody claims that in turn represent aspects of our internal and external world. Films showcase this dialectic.

The tradition of Jewish American comedy provides an intriguing perspective for considering this aspect of cinema. The Jewish identity in American cinema matters not only as a legacy of the past but also for its progress into the future. It allows for different spectral emergences.

Let me consider two examples in these concluding remarks. They are taken from the works of Joel and Ethan Coen. Let us first examine one of the most successful films of the Coen Brothers, *The Big Lebowski*. The story revolves around a case of synonymity in Los Angeles involving two men both named Jeffry Lebowski: a hippy nicknamed "The Dude" and an elderly invalid billionaire. This scenario produces a plethora of absurd situations and encounters, which can, of course, be interpreted as a critique of the postmodern fragmentation of life. However, even a fragmented life cannot eliminate identity. On the contrary, it reinforces its presence, as demonstrated by the case of synonymity. Identity is compelled to confront its spectres: love, friendship, parenthood. Jewishness is not an overt feature of this play on identity; rather, it is dislocated in another character, albeit paradoxically. The only character explicitly identified as a Jew in the film, Walter Sobchak, one of

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6. Stiegler develops an interpretation of Kant's schematism in the 2nd volume of *La technique et le temps*.

the Dude's friends, was not born a Jew: he converted to marry his wife. Subsequently, he became a proud, and sometimes aggressive, pious believer. As a hallmark of this ironic displacement of identity, Walter's wife divorced him, leaving him alone with his new identity. Identity can also imply that we are capable of embodying each other's spectres.

A similar displacement occurs at the beginning of another film by the Coen Brothers, *A Serious Man*. The movie opens with a scene set in 19th-century Eastern Europe. On a snowy night, a man living in a *shtetl*, a Jewish village, invites Reb Groshkover, an elderly respected man, to his home for dinner. However, his wife informs him that the old man has died: her husband has likely invited a *dybbuk*, an evil spirit that possesses the bodies of the deceased. Consequently, the woman plunges an ice pick into Reb Groshkover's chest. The wounded and bloodied old man then leaves their home and vanishes into the darkness of the night. The husband, evidently an ideal ancestor of the "serious man" who is the protagonist of the film, will never know whether they committed the dreadful sin of murdering a respected individual or protected themselves from an evil spirit. His status as a pious man has irreversibly become ambiguous: in a similar fashion, the status of the serious man of the protagonist is challenged by a series of events. As a last resort in seeking an explanation for his unfair misadventures, Larry Gopnik, the serious man, consults an elderly rabbi, who recounts the story of a dentist who apparently found Jewish writings naturally inscribed in the teeth of a goy, a non-Jewish patient. In A Serious Man, a film that narrates the incommensurability of evil and goodness and the lack of meaning in human life, the spectrality haunting our experience and imagination is displaced and unrecognised: it emerges only through enigmatic references to the cultural background of the protagonist but cannot be acknowledged as such. The moral significance of the story remains unrecognised and can easily morph into a demon.

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