



# Walking the Streets with a Swarm of Prismatic Specters

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## OUT OF THE MOUTHS OF “CASSEROLES” *textes qui bougent au rythme du carré rouge*

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### Walking the Streets with a Swarm of Prismatic Specters

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*Until Edison invented the electric light, most of the world was covered in darkness. The physical darkness outside and the inner darkness of the soul were mixed together with no boundary separating the two. They were directly linked ... People of that period probably couldn't conceive of these two types of darkness as separate from each other, but today things are different. The darkness in the outside world has vanished but the darkness in our hearts remains virtually unchanged. Just like an iceberg, what we label the ego or the consciousness is, for the most part, sunk in darkness, and that estrangement sometimes creates a deep contradiction or confusion within us.*

- Haruki Murakami, *Kafka on the Shore*

I walked the streets of Montreal on Tuesday, May 22, like at least 250,000 other protesters. We were down there in the streets but our ghosts were synchronically haunting the parallel, oblique and transversal lines running on today's ether. I followed their movements in cyberspaces – the movements of the crowd on GPS fuelled real-time mappings, the movements of pseudo-authored ideas, slogans and other impossible exchanges on Facebook and many other electronic meshworks. I was storing my impressions in the digital format of a 2GB SD card, eight million pixels at a time with the rhythm of clicks on a *Coolpix* camera; I was recording the songs and chants in MPEG1 layer 3 streams on my red *Voice Tracer*, on yet another 1GB of available memory space. I was not walking while reading newspapers, at the risk of stepping on a rake. I read the papers, most of the time, most of them, anyways, to get a glimpse of the reigning confusion, when it is not simple disinformation, propaganda and lies. To do it while walking would probably mean ending on my ass. I was reading the city instead, my eyes free to watch ahead, only interrupted by an occasional glance sideways to the small screen of one of my prosthetic recording, locating or meshworking devices. I was alive and kicking, and my ghosts followed the *tempo* of my feet on the pavement.

In other words, I moved back and forth, to and from the other side of the interface while walking with my fellow protesters. I did not exactly expect that. It took me by



surprise. I used to be frankly disillusioned: I did not see any positive way out of the present crisis. I felt that the combined pressure of a scornful government and an irresponsible public opinion (too used to accept without a doubt the lies it is shamefully fed in what we still call *a representative democracy*) would crush the students, like any other *amateur* force thrown their way. It might still happen, but I moved back and forth anyways, in the streets and along the ethereal lines. There is no point in complaining about this sorry state of affairs if one does nothing about it. So, what to do? At first, the answer was simple enough: walk!

But it slowly came to my mind that this simple and customary movement of my body in the streets, accompanied by many other bodies, was taking on another resonance. It felt different. I could not exactly figure out what was different, but it felt different. Without more reflection, I reacted on an impulse, trying to do what I usually do: write. As I was writing a text that would eventually be published very quickly by my friends at *CTheory* (Bardini, 2012), I figured out what was different. In the process of writing on laughter as a good way to react to the current *jumble* in which this politically savvy government has thrown us all, it dawned upon me: the *simulacrum* has shifted sides of the interface, the specters are not what/whom they used to be. From the urges of the twin doctors of the *Minor Indeterminate Noospheric Deity French Universal Church of Kicking*, I drew inspiration: from *Doctor Simulacrum* and *Doctor Differans*, I got my head to start to make sense of it with yet another text, this text. Witness, gentle reader:

... there is a ghostly spectrality (phantoms and ghosts) and a prismatic spectrality... ghostly spectrality relates to disconnection, the double behind the ghost, a very singular Other in the sense that he or she comes back to haunt you. That spectrality is haunted by emptiness and death. When decanting the individual into different roles and facets, however, there is no haunting. On the contrary, the individual is no longer inhabited by something but is completely extrapolated, exterior. He or she is best described in terms of multiple connections. (Baudrillard, 2008, p. 40)

As I walked the streets with a swarm of prismatic specters, I realized that I was one in a crowd of such other specters, all joined by the power of ethereal connections and the pavement. Witness again this early prophesy, from the same year – the year of the World Wide Web, a good ten years before Facebook, Twitter and other related social meshworks:

...also at stake, indissociably, is the differential deployment of tekne-, of techno-science or tele-technology. It obliges us more than ever to think the virtualisation of space and time, the possibility of virtual events whose movement and speed prohibit us more than ... from opposing presence to its representation, “real time” to “deferred time,” effectivity to its simulacrum, the

living to the non-living, in short, the living to the living-dead of its ghosts. It obliges us to think, from there, another space for democracy. For democracy-to-come and thus for justice. We have suggested that the event we are prowling around here hesitates between the singular “who” of the ghost and the general “what” of the simulacrum. In the virtual space of all the teletechnosciences, in the general dis-location to which our time is destined — as are from now on the places of lovers, families, nations — the messianic trembles on the edge of this event itself. It is this hesitation, it has no other vibration, it does not “live” otherwise, but it would no longer be messianic if it stopped hesitating: how to give rise and to give place [donner lieu], still, to render it, this place, to render it habitable, but without killing the future in the name of old frontiers? ... This messianic hesitation does not paralyse any decision, any affirmation, any responsibility. On the contrary, it grants them their elementary condition. It is their very experience. (Derrida, 1994, p.212)

*Real time*, this wartime cybernetic invention, *can be* a weapon of mass distraction. It can also be, if the delay is smaller than a walker’s stride and shared by many as one temporal experience, a connective and powerful mobilization device. For “real time” is actually the illusion of the disappearance of a delay, and hence a disguised “deferred time.” And mobilization indeed, means above all moving your feet. Here you go, myriads of prismatic specters! What if indeed our time was not so much destined to dis-location but rather to *disjunktion* (to be perpetually out of joints), be it synthetic, or else? What if there could be another, renewed, sense of place emerging out of this disjunctive temporal synthesis? What if the hesitation between junktion and disjunktion was this messianic experience? And what if the “real” was but an abbreviation, a remainder of the compound expression, “real time”? What if the virtualization of time and space, like its twin process, the actualization of time and space, belong to realization itself? Disparate apparitions and *dis-partitions*, what if the prismatic specters proliferated, really? Could we experience a renewed intimacy amongst prismatic specters?

Not long ago I had the pleasure to participate in a symposium with Tim Ingold, the great anthropologist of lines and meshworks.<sup>1</sup> At some point during the conversation at the end of the day, he made a remark that I found quite powerful. He referred to the wrong attribution of the highest form of intimacy, and hence to a privileged model of mediated communication, to face-to-face communication. This model, he said, is usually assumed to reflect the highest form of intimacy when, in fact, it proposes a *confrontational model of intimacy*. How could confrontation translate into shared intimacy? It made me think of approximately the same point, once made by Michel Serres (1982): the so-called linear model of communication, the Shannon-Weaver model, can also be read understood as “a sort of game played by two interlocutors considered as united against the phenomena of interference and confusion, or against individuals with some stake in interrupting communication.”

And Serres added, “these interlocutors are in no way opposed, as in the traditional conception of the dialectic game; on the contrary, they are on the same side, tied together by a mutual interest; they battle together against noise” (pp.66-67). Side by side rather than face to face: this was exactly Ingold’s point, that day when he claimed that walking side by side with somebody is a much better model of intimacy than face to face dialog (your turn, and *at the envoi’s end, I touch*). Walking side by side, you see the same perspective, you can share your experience from a common standpoint. And Ingold adds, to my delight: it is not the point of view that matters, the nodes of network you form in sharing this experience, but the *lines* you walk or experience, the relations that make the felt of the meshwork. Prismatic specters are such ectoplasms made of lines, when ghostly specters are pseudo-entities haunted by the illusion of being a node (under the triple spell of the double, death and emptiness).

The makers of the simulacra attempt – and often succeed at – the transformation of prismatic ghosts into ghostly specters (hereafter phantoms). This where some media are useful: broadcast media, essentially where a central diffuser emits towards a crowd of receivers, all equally equipped with the mere power given by a remote control (zap it!). This is where representative democracy is useful: by the power of once-in-a-while elections (a term), professional leaders emerge and are free to talk instead of their electors for the duration of their terms. In some countries, the elected leaders do not even have to suffer the rigors of fixed terms, and can pretty much call an election each time the polls tell them they are more likely to win; this is where centrally controlled media – so-called public communication services – become particularly handy. Both united, representative democracy and centrally controlled broadcast media, once deemed a great nation-unity builder (creating all audience members as equal), then become the great manufacture of consent, or, in other words, a fabric of phantoms. People desert the elections and sit bored in front of YouTube for the few nights every few years when that’s all there is to watch. They are bored but they stay inside, in the comfort of their well-earned *solitude*. Centrally controlled broadcast media belong to *solitude enhancement machines* [*dispositif*], where the phantoms have all their free time to eventually wonder whether it means that they are more or less alone and/or feel more or less lonely (Lunenfeld, 2005). The morning after, they go back to work, *apparently to make a living*.

Thanked be the cybernetic semi-gods of our troubled time, all media are *not* centrally controlled broadcast media anymore. Thanked be the power of fiction, all centrally controlled media are not necessarily like that (there is reality TV after all). Thanked be the evil cybernetic geniuses, all cybernetic media are not necessarily prismatic specter inducing apparatuses either. But here comes another messianic hesitation. The tension is quite high, actually, around the opportunities to transform cybernetic connective media into quasi centrally controlled broadcasting media. Each time the question becomes something like, “Are you a Star on YouTube, or do you have more

followers than you actually follow?” the star academy business model rules – or tries to. Each time the nodes take over the lines, each time the common singularity as a node wins over the common singularity as a tissue of relations, the fabric of phantoms progresses (yes, I know certain sciences call them individuals). Each time you are left to wonder and ponder “What about me?”, you are a step closer to becoming a living phantom, as this particular breed of nihilism will eat you alive. So, there are connective cybernetic media, but they are deeply contested to rejoin the manufacture of consent. What else then is needed to recover the prismatic specters from this odious fate of becoming phantoms?

One such feature is perhaps *mobility*, but here again if it might be a necessary condition, it might not be a sufficient condition. For, again, there is phantom inducing and prismatic specter inducing mobility. A node remains a node, even if a *mobile* one. Here comes yet another messianic hesitation. *Rise up and walk!* But then again, there is walking and walking (and Bruce Chatwin might have concurred). You can walk as if you were still in your bubble, oblivious of the world: your prosthetic devices might participate in making you yet a bit louder, or your thumbs yet a bit more active, but you will still appear as a phantom to your fellow travelers. The common use, unfortunately enough in its ontological confusion, has a word for this: you will appear as trapped in *a virtual world*, meaning another world than this world, that is not virtual at all – you *actually* speak too loudly, you thumbs *actually* get too much of their exercise – but rather digital, i.e. severed from the analog world where most of us move our bodies. So-called “virtual worlds” are mere symptoms of the pandemic Gnostic disease of our time (that did not actually start with digital technologies, since all media, starting with language and orality, can be experienced as such “virtual worlds”). Digital worlds might produce phantoms in this world. On the other hand, mobile cybernetic media can augment reality, i.e. induce an augmented sense of presence in this world (the only world there is). In this case, the digital works as an *addendum*, i.e. it adds more lines to your trajectory, be they ethereal albeit real lines (as real as the lines you walk on). Google mapping your way in a city augments reality, when ego-googling does not (whether you are walking or not does not matter). The reality augmented by digital means is prismatic specter inducing, when “virtual worlds” are phantom producing. Yes, phantoms (in this world) might enjoy a second life (or a penguin life, if they are younger), when prismatic specters have no need for such doubles: the only life they enjoy is already multiple, raised at the power of their connections.

All simulacra are not made equal. If it is now a philosophical cliché that the concept of a dog does not bite, some simulacra do bite more than others. Those simulacra that are sustained by the performative power of an institutional backup, whatever that be, seem indeed to bite more. They do when they are equipped with the scriptures of an emergency law, for instance. Keep on walking, swarms of prismatic specters! Keep on using your hands on the casseroles!

Montréal, May 30, 2012

## Note

1. This was the Vital Beauty symposium in this year V2 Dutch Electronic Arts Festival, Amsterdam, May 15, 2012. See Tim Ingold's chapter in the resulting book, *Vital Beauty: Reclaiming Aesthetics in the Tangle of Technology and Nature*, edited by Joke Brower, Arjen Mulder and Lars Spuybroek, Rotterdam, Nai/V2, 2012.

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