



Spiritual Knots On the effectiveness of ghosts

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Spirits haunt our world. Spirits that cause a shiver, if we believe ourselves to have seen or sensed them. If we are, however, aware of them as being hallucinations, their effectiveness might be impaired. But how can we know, if spirits are concerned?

The West German word »geist« (or Flemish »geest« or English »ghost«) originates from a word stem meaning »agitated, furious and to shiver« and developed into being used for supernatural beings and ghosts. In contrast to the lexical group »ghost« and »ghosts« (and »Geist« in German), »Gespenst« (German for »spectre«) belongs to the lexical group »spannen (to span)«, and has more to do with temptation, agitated expectation and luring. On the other hand it can also be derived from »spectre« (»spectrum« in Latin) that together with »spectare« opens a field of lexical meaning ranging from »looking« and »seeing«, to »image« and »figure« as well as »silhouette« and »idol«. The spectre does therefore refer to something visible in the first place. This etymological significance chain makes it easy to believe that spectres are ghosts returned to earth – visible and animated by a spirit. [1]

Ghosts and spectres – generations of ghosts are the others who are not present, and do not live at present neither in nor outside us. Ghosts are border crossers, *Derrida* discusses in his book on *Marx's* spectres [2], and it is nearly impossible to talk about them, to them, with them and above all make or let them talk. But one can think of them in this sense and thus release the possibility to address the spectre. [3]

This text is about the impossibility; the attempts to make them – the spectres – talk against our better knowledge. Despite all belief in the strict separation between the real and the non-real, the living and the non-living, the belief into the opposition of what is present and what is not, I intend to think of spirits as a possibility. Therefore, two

perspectives are analysed and emphasised: first, the one of clairvoyance – seeing a spirit, a presentation making it speak and second, the one of hallucinations – an illusion, a mental delusion creating a spirit that provides an evidence for the non-presence of spirits as soon as it is revealed. One goal of this analysis is the demonstration of ignorance in the face of spirits. Ignorance is recognised as the power behind many ghost stories. An ignorance that does not deny striving for awareness, and does not regard the transformation of ignorance into knowledge as the goal of all research and questions, but rather forms knots with knowledge weaving different strands into each other, thus turning fictions and spirits into a power [4] for sensations evoking shuddering and agitation, something that gives you the creeps [5]. It is about phenomena representing the limits of experience in experience itself.

Material

I would like to demonstrate representations of such experiences by means of two ghost stories respectively: by reading *Kant's* »Dreams of a Spirit Seer« [6] and by watching recent documentaries on ghosts such as were introduced in the »Dimension PSI« [7] broadcast by German television (ARD) in autumn 2003, a documentary that is controversial in para-scientific circles, also. Both projects are about experiences with ghosts that were mainly documented in popular scientific contexts such as television and light-reading magazines, but whose credibility is nevertheless examined by university and other scientific institutions. [8] One representation ventures to discuss a story published in popular magazines in the context of philosophical theories, while the other uses para-scientific reports as a starting point for a popular TV magazine and deliberately includes procedures of scientific experiments for the line of evidence into the magazine's dramaturgy. Both concepts are about the limits of science as well as the effectiveness of border crossers. And both quote stories that are identified as coming from experience, that thematise the relationship of spirit and matter, belief and knowledge, non-knowledge and recognition.

Setting: »Dimension PSI«

The short trailer for the TV magazine »Dimension PSI-Geister« that can be downloaded on the website [9] attempts to motivate belief in spirits with a dramatic musical introduction. It has been described as very appropriate for the report due its emotive effects, even by

4 *Derrida, Specters of Marx*, 26.

5 www.wissen.de or *Oxford Dictionary of Current Idiomatic English*: to give sb. etc. the creeps etc. (informal) cause one to feel fear, loathing aversion, nervous anxiety; make one's flesh creep/crawl; make one's hair stand on end.

6 *Kant, Dreams of a Spirit Seer*.

7 <http://www.daserste.de/dimensionpsi>

8 e.g. *Die Gesellschaft zur wissenschaftlichen Untersuchung von Parawissenschaften e.V. (GWUP, The Society for Scientific Research on Paranormal Sciences)*: short for *Skeptiker (Sceptics with a magazine of the same name)*; goal: to defend science and critical thinking (see *Flyer for GWUP conference on para-technology from May 20 to 22, 2004*).

9 <http://www.daserste.de/dimensionpsi>

1 *Duden Herkunftswörterbuch*; *Kluge, Etymologisches Wörterbuch*; *The Oxford Encyclopedic Dictionary*.

2 *Derrida, Specters of Marx*.

3 *Derrida, Specters of Marx*.

10 Magazine Skeptiker, Dimension PSI: Totally Paranormal, an interview with Martin Lambeck and Andreas Hergovich by Rouven Schäfer; <http://www.gwup.org/skeptiker>

11 If you edit individual stills from the sequence, you will recognise images that are presented on other websites in relation to the topic ghosts.



critics from GWUP (*The Society for Scientific Research on Paranormal Sciences*) [10] Lashing images of graveyards, necromancies and confrontations with spirits are supplemental. These quickly edited sequences and the blurred nature of the displayed images do not allow any analysis or recognition, and result in a distinct atmosphere causing shudders beyond any analytical look [11], an effect enhanced by the dominant music. This results in the gaining of credibility for the scientifically modified reports on »spirit experiences« which might have meant positive effects on the ratings.

Three settings where direct contacts with spirits were experienced specify shuddering as a hovering knowledge of ghosts:

1. Hampton Court Palace near London: Ghosts

»Many people's hair stands on end, they are under the impression they are being pushed and hit by an invisible being. There have been fainting attacks. Not only kings have lived here. For centuries ghosts have been walking within these old and noble walls.« (Quotation from the trailer)

2. Belmez in Spain: Faces Drawn by Themselves

»When Maria Gomez came home on August 23rd 1971, she discovered a ghostly drawn face on her kitchen floor.« ... »The faces of Belem, Spain drawn by invisible hands leave renowned scientists without an explanation.« (Quotation from the trailer)

»Hauntings, the fear of ghosts has always existed within living memory. The search for answers leads through haunted castles, haunted houses and modern laboratories.« (Quotation from the trailer)

3. Edinburgh Castle in Scotland: Experiments

Prof. Richard Wiseman conducts the experiments in *Edinburgh Castle*, and does not believe in ghosts but believes in humans seeing ghosts. As a psychologist he wants to learn more about why they see them and to show that these experiences can be limited to locations. He conducts experiments where 218 test subjects are put under surveillance by video cameras and thermal scanners in the different vaults and dungeons of *Edinburgh Castle* and are observed for their reactions. 95 people report unexplainable phenomena and apparitions such as anxiety attacks, dizziness etc. One of the experiments has to be stopped because a woman hears breathing from one corner, sees something gleaming, and leaves the room in a panic while the camera is running. Although the camera records everything,

nothing can be seen, heard or identified on the recorded tape – no gleaming or breathing. (Summary of a quotation from the trailer)

The clips from the recording of the experiment in *Edinburgh Castle* do not answer why the camera could not see or hear anything. The camera cannot record the evidence for ghosts. The presence of ghosts is however demonstrated by visualising the proband's »terror« in the recorded image of a shaking and shuddering person. According to the comment she experiences this terror at the sudden gleaming in one corner of the dark room.

This ambivalence allows for the creation of sensations, keeping the knowledge about ghosts in balance. Even if the non-existence of ghosts is possible to prove, this could only be demonstrated, if they were distinctly brought into existence. But all experiments in the series proved that to be impossible in the end, as *Andreas Hergovich*, the representative of *GWUP* stresses in the interview on the broadcast. [12] Thus, both existence and non-existence cannot be captured. In its press statement from November 18th 2003, *GWUP* is not impressed by the demonstrated non-knowledge, as it is based on known objections by critics of parapsychology. *GWUP* (together with Prof. Dr. Martin Lambeck from the *Technical University in Berlin*, among others) has continually proved on many levels that PSI-gifted persons in any case cannot use their ability in a controlled manner (if it is »real« at all), therefore dooming every experiment with test subjects in the laboratory to failure. *GWUP* conducts regular tests – for example, the large-scale divination test in 1990 which was even broadcast on a regional TV channel in *Hessen, Germany*. The documented effects only deviate minimally from a mathematically random model. [13] Other parapsychologists argue that PSI might be elusive in the end. This means that paranormal phenomena will only occur when one does not intend to document or record them. *GWUP* consequently supports actions like the one of the scientific prizewinner *James Randi*, who at the beginning of this year promised prize money of one million dollars to everyone who could prove paranormal abilities under controlled, scientific conditions. In *Germany*, tests are planned for August 2004. Abilities eligible for the prize money are for example successful divination, extra-sensual perception or psychokinesis.



12 Skeptiker, interview with Hergovich: <http://www.gwup.org/skeptiker>

13 Scientists from *GWUP* criticise the *ARD* documentary »Dimension PSI«.





The camera recording from *Edinburgh Castle* in this respect only shows what is relatively well known, and is assumed anyway by representatives from *GWUP*. The result that *GWUP* representatives, as well as the TV report »Dimension PSI« come to remains: despite the use of different recording techniques, the knowledge on spirits or telekinesis remains uncertified. Doubt becomes the driving force behind the question of whether the deceased were contacted, whether spoons or other testing devices could be moved by thoughts alone, and of course contributes to raising the ratings for »Dimension PSI«. [14]

In the broadcast itself, the relation of spirits and knowledge is determined by documenting the techniques of clairvoyance (to make spirits talk) and hallucination (revealing spiritual contacts as delusion). The possible philosophical consequences from the different constellations that can be extracted from the trailer are to be developed here in relation to *Kant's* work »Dreams of a Spirit Seer« [15], which attempts an analysis of the spirit-seeing abilities of the popular visionary *Swedenborg*. *Swedenborg* also attempts to make the spirits talk and to prove it accordingly.

Kant's »Dreams«

The dreams of a spirit seer were anonymously published by *Immanuel Kant* in 1766 with the ominous subtitle »Illustrated by Dreams of Metaphysics«, thus calling metaphysics as an actor to the stage of dreams. This work is the result of *Kant's* intense study of the publications and reports by the Swedish theologian, natural scientist and visionary. The work that relates to the popular scientific publications was then met with much consternation among *Kant's* colleagues in philosophy. In the work's preface he himself explains the writing of this book: »What philosopher has not at one time or another cut the queerest figure imaginable, between the affirmations of a reasonable and firmly convinced eye-witness, and the inner resistance of insurmountable doubt? Shall he wholly deny the truth of all the apparitions they tell about? What reasons can he quote to disprove them?« [16]

In his short review from 1769, *Moses Mendelssohn* writes about the doubts *Kant* causes in his readers: »...The humorous profoundness this little piece is written with does from time to time leave the reader in doubt whether Herr Kant has intended to ridicule metaphysics or to make spirit-seeing credible.« [17] Both suggestions appear to be founded.

In the second part of *Kant's* essay on spirit-seeing, the experiences of the spirit seer are cited: »There lives at Stockholm a certain Mr. Swedenborg, a gentleman of comfortable means and independent position. His whole occupation for more than twenty years has been, as he himself says, to be in closest intercourse with spirits and deceased souls; to receive news from the other world, and in exchange, give those who are there tidings from the present; to write big volumes about his discoveries...« [18]

Kant then proceeds to describe various experiences *Mr. Swedenborg* reports of in his publications, which continue to be cited.

For example:

A *Madame Marteville*, the widow of a Dutch envoy at the Swedish court, who was reminded by a goldsmith to pay some arrears due on a silver-service he furnished her, approached *Mr. Swedenborg*. The widow was convinced that this debt must have been already settled in her husband's lifetime, but she found no proof among the papers he left. She therefore requested *Mr. Swedenborg* to procure from her husband in the other world information about the whereabouts of the receipts. Just a few days afterwards *Mr. Swedenborg* reported to the lady that the requisite receipts were in a hidden partition of a closet, which in her opinion had been entirely emptied. A search was made at once, and the receipts were found, voiding all claims from the goldsmith. [19] Thus, *Swedenborg* reports on his ability to contact spirits he verifies by correct answers.

The special gift of clairvoyance he believes himself to possess always challenges verification. What is seen and heard that escapes experience needs to be proved and can only by this be recognised in something »Seen« – for example by the location of the goldsmith's receipt. However, as it cannot be proved in the end whether the spirit was really convinced to speak, or it was a mere coincidence, not only what was seen but the proof must also be believed. The spirit that was made to speak is continually being re-invented with this proof and therefore demands further proofs. The existence of spirits will never be ultimately proved. [20]

With the story of *Mr. Swedenborg*, who believes he is in contact with spirits and appears to be a clairvoyant, *Kant* seizes the opportunity to discuss the relations of spirits and bodies, soul and matter in the con-

14 In total contrast to such a staging of non-knowledge does the non-recognition of a technique become the driving power behind audience attendance for the shows of magic tricksters like *David Copperfield* who manage to sell out big venues with their shows. People attend because they know that what is happening can be explained, but cannot realise how the trick is working. *Peter Monnerjahn*, Nov. 19, 2003, ARD goes ghost-hunting, *Telepolis*, <http://www.heise.de/tp>

15 *Kant*, *Dreams of a Spirit Seer*.

16 *Kant*, *Dreams of a Spirit Seer*, 38.

17 *Kant*, *Träume eines Geistersehers*, Translation into English *Sabine Melchert*.

18 *Kant*, *Dreams of a Spirit Seer*, 92.

19 *Kant*, *Dreams of a Spirit Seer*, 94.

20 *There are different methods and explanations for making a spirit speak. A popularly quoted story from the 50s of the last century is the one about »Bridey Murphy«. The alleged contact was founded as follows: Mrs. Virginia Tighe, who remembered the life of Bridey Murphy, born in 1798, in her hypnosis performed by Morey Bernstein, was supposed to have been Bridey Murphy in one of her previous existences. In hypnosis Mrs. Tighe was able to recollect the life of Bridey Murphy. These recollections were taped and sold in wide numbers.*

21 Kant, *Dreams of a Spirit Seer*, 46.

text of metaphysical teaching. He has already introduced this discussion in the first part of his essay, before he reports the spiritual encounters of Mr. Swedenborg as experiences to the reader. One could say that in the first part of his essay Kant anticipates an appearance that as an experience becomes the prerequisite for the reasons Kant discusses in this first part. In the second part these experiences are formalised as appearances with the stories of Mr. Swedenborg. Such an exemplification or concretisation is necessary as was also demonstrated by the example of »the goldsmith's receipt«, because spirits themselves are never visualised, but rather the imaginations they effect – the spectres. Only by experience can spirits be perceived. To this extent, Kant questions the principles of a dogmatic metaphysics on the basis of reading reports on visionary experiences.

Assertion of Spirits

To follow metaphysics through its entanglements, Kant writes of the immaterial natures in the world, based on the structural assumption that spirits are crossing borders. They present a possibility between the real and the fictional, and are not merely spiritual, but can also be corporeally understood. Spirits – and not just the one spirit – are therefore not the negative to the material. This becomes evident in the spirits' necessary assignment to a certain location. Even if they are constituted by their differentiation from the material, one can only perceive them in experience.

But in the end even matter can be as little known – according to Kant's theory both might only be observed in their external expansion; in their external relations. »...if I want to place this simple substance in that space of one cubic foot, which is full of matter, would a single element have to make room for it, so that the spirit might enter? You think yes? Very well, then his supposed space would have to lose a second elementary particle – were to take in a second spirit ... space would be filled with spirits whose mass exists just as well by impenetrability, as if it was full of matter, and, just like the latter, must be subject to the laws of impact. But substances of this kind, although they might contain the power of reason, would not differ at all from the elements of matter of which also we know only the powers which they exert externally by their very existence, and do NOT all know what might belong to their interior qualities!!!« [21]

So it is not surprising when Kant proceeds to emphasise that the spiritual substance (immaterial substance) cannot be said to possess expansion any more than matter.

»For only that which, existing separate and for itself alone, occupies a space, possesses extent; but the substances which are elements of matter occupy space only by the exterior effect which they have upon others ... The limits of extent are determined by the figure of a thing.« [22]

Kant demonstrates the endeavour in order to found it on the already described observations, not to restrict the state of the spiritual world to notions of spiritual nature in general, as it is too hypothetical. In his essay he accordingly focuses on Mr. Swedenborg's visions as external effects that can make figures we could call spirits speak. To achieve this he uses artifice.

The Stage of Spiritual Experiences

In his essay, Kant comes from reason to experience, from metaphysics to observation, to reveal dogmatic metaphysics with this artifice itself as invention in the end. By emphasising at the same time that metaphysics will always exist, he concludes that these spiritual experiences will too. [23] »It is as little to be expected that human spirit will totally resign from metaphysical examinations as it is to be expected that we will cease breathing to stop our intake of polluted air.« [24]

Kant therefore considers it necessary to strip metaphysics from its dogmatic covering by assuming »the standpoint of my own« as well as the position »of a foreign reason outside of myself«, and observes the judgements together with their most secret causes, from the point of view of others. »It is true, the comparison of both observations results in pronounced parallaxes, but it is the only means of preventing the optical delusion, and of putting conceptions in regard to the power of knowledge in human nature into their right places.« [25]

One could conclude the dream Kant intends as a stage for metaphysics as well as the spirit seer as the space offering the possibility for re-inventing oneself over and over again. Metaphysics and spirit seer become actors in this space, but at the same time the actor meta-

22 Kant, *Dreams of a Spirit Seer*, 47, 48.

23 Kant, *Dreams of a Spirit Seer*, 85.

24 Weischedel, *Denken mit Kant*, 26 (iii245).

25 Kant, *Dreams of a Spirit Seer*, 85/86.

physics is endeavouring to explain the imaginary screen of the spirit seers. When awake, the spirit seer experiences what the dreamer experiences while sleeping: the »soul« produces an inner image that would be perceived by the external senses among the objects presenting themselves to their real sensation. Without the sensation, writes *Kant*, it would be improbable for us to imagine objects outside of ourselves.

What we identify as sensation is for *Kant*, however, not free of despotism and is understood in the context of a world of notions. The waking state might serve as an example here, when one regards – with drowsy and half-opened eyes – the bed-curtains, and forms out of them figures of human faces or objects. Such a delusion ceases at will, and as soon as, attention is aroused. [26] This event is subject to despotism following *Kant's* theory. Consequently, materials, certain situations, educational notions and prejudices are required to imagine spirits at all – whether it be in clairvoyance or in a hallucinatory state. As long as spirits are believed to exist, as long as notions and prejudices are assumed, spirits will be recognised in the information received and their address perceived.

A diseased person would not develop images of a spirit-world. *»It is further very probable that the idea of spectres, taken from education, furnishes the head of a diseased person with materials for deluding apparitions, and that a brain free from all such prejudices would not so soon hatch out phantasms of this kind ... Furthermore, as the disease of the visionary concerns not so much the reason, as a deception of the senses, it will be easily recognized that the unfortunate subject cannot remove the delusion by any reasoning; for a true or apparent impression of the senses precedes all the judgements of the reason, and carries with it immediate evidence, far exceeding all other persuasion.«* [27]

In *Kant's* theory it would not be possible to gain knowledge of the supernatural as far as the speculative abilities of reason are concerned. In this sense, spirits have always been inventions. And clairvoyance would assume hallucinatory effects in the broadest sense. Clairvoyance and hallucinations are inseparable in experience, as experience is always in context with a world of notions. This could be demonstrated with »Dimension PSI«, too, that in my opinion attempts to provoke sensations that recall a world of notions, and integrate into a context evoking the experiences of spirits.

Non-knowledge and Belief

Kant knows what the TV report cannot prevent: one can assume spirits, believe in them, but one cannot know anything about them. But if one assumes to know about them, one has to believe in evidence. It therefore makes sense when *Kant* writes: *»The same ignorance makes me so bold as to absolutely deny the truth of the various ghost stories, and yet with the common, although queer, reservation that while I doubt any one of them, still I have a certain faith in the whole of them taken together. Spiritual nature can never be thought positive as there is no according data in our sensations.«* [28]

One can only sense as if they were there. The science-theoretician and philosopher *Vaihinger* writes in his book on the philosophy of the »as if« 130 years after *Kant's* deliberations: *»One can only say that the objective apparitions can be regarded as if they behaved like this but nevermore does there exist a right to assume a dogmatic position and change the »as if« into a that.«* [29]

Metaphysics would be a science of the »as-if« that strives to become a »that« as soon as it turns dogmatic. The belief transforming the »as if« into a »that«, as *Freud* is able to demonstrate in his writings on culture, seems to be constitutive for science – because only now is it possible to answer questions that could never be answered. [30] This transformation is demonstrated by »Dimension PSI«. Even if it cannot always come up with explanations, it is their declared goal to find them. But only to insist on a »remainder« to be able to meditate: *And there are spirits! Credo quia absurdum: I believe because it is absurd.* [31]

In this sense »Dimension PSI« transforms a non-knowledge into a knowledge only to insist on the belief that catches up again with non-knowledge. A clairvoyance is revealed as hallucination; as delusion to be re-constituted as clairvoyance again. The following example makes this idea concrete: *»When Vic Tandy, computer expert at the University of Coventry, Great Britain, was under the impression to have seen a ghost one night this led to a sensational discovery. [In the corner of his eye he saw figures rushing by that disappeared with a closer look.] He explores these phenomena and discovers that a fan in his office generates oscillations in the low-frequency range. Termed infrasonic sound, it is neither visible nor audible to the human senses, but the waves*

26 *Kant, Dreams of a Spirit Seer, 81.*

27 *Kant, Dreams of a Spirit Seer, 82.*

28 *Kant, Dreams of a Spirit Seer, 88.*

29 *Vaihinger, The Philosophy of the As If, 44 (German edition).*

30 *Sick, Kartenmuster. (Map Patterns), 41, <http://www.sub.uni-hamburg.de/disse/1179/dissertation.pdf> This can also be called a procedure of simulation not practising an »as if« but a »that«.*

31 *This sentence is ascribed to Tertullian – it remains feeble against the logical objection.*

32 *Dimension PSI*, 34/35. <http://www.daserste.de/dimensionpsi/gaensehaut>

have a strong effect on humans.« [32] On the basis of his discoveries *Vic Tandy* calls for a series of tests with probands, reports *Walter von Lucadou*, the author of »Dimension PSI«. The tests confirm the assumption that the human brain might show functional disorders when exposed to extremely low sound oscillations. Consequences are perceptual disorders such as »optic smearing effects«, mortal dread, muscle spasms and hyperventilation. Electrical devices, as well as airflows in large buildings can evoke such infrasonic sound phenomena. In this respect, infrasonic sound could be regarded as a key to ghost phenomena. Sound at the frequency of 15 – 20 Hertz-infrasonic sound – causes the human eye to pass on incorrect information. According to this example, the ghosts were hallucinations – delusions we perceive as ghosts. This explanation proves their non-presence.

Recognised hallucinations might promote knowledge of a fabrication mechanism, for example. A discussion of hallucinations is always based on a recognised delusion and the attempt to halt non-knowledge with explanations. But what can be proved following my reading of *Kant's* deliberations, and with *Vic Tandy's* example is not the non-presence of spirits but the fabrication of their alienation. The trailer focuses on the fabrication of sensations against all knowledge. That the spirit remains seems to be a dream of the trailer, too. Belief against logic: there are spirits.

Kant structurally demonstrates which position this alienation assumes, and how it can become dogmatically effective. Only to this extent can one say that *Kant's* topic is the role of the »as if« in the creations of our experience. Their fabrication and autonomy are significant. [33] To discover the tracks of these creations even within the tradition of philosophy itself, he delivers us his essay where he illustrates the dreams of a spirit seer by dreams of metaphysics: »Do you believe in reality? But of course! What a question! Is reality something we have to believe in?« [34]

The spiritual knots show themselves in the entanglements of sensations, experience and imaginations of more than One that might effect knowledge, that are entangled with belief – as every science and its spirits.

33 See *Latour*, *Die Hoffnung der Pandora*, 336 (German edition).

34 *Latour*, *Die Hoffnung der Pandora*.



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