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Ghostwriting an Authorship without Aura

Essay for *Lo Squaderno* no. 62 Ghosts

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Bio

Cameron McEwan is an associate professor, architectural theorist, and educator at Northumbria University School of Architecture. His research focuses on architecture's status as a critical project. Cameron co-edited *Accounts* (Pelinu) and the Architecture and Collective Life issue of *Architecture and Culture* (T&F/Routledge). His book, *Analogical City*, is forthcoming (Punctum).

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Abstract

This essay argues that ghostwriting is a collective material practice that intervenes in the logic of the information political economy, which has commodified intellectual work as intellectual property. In everyday use, ghostwriting is when a text is written by an unnamed author and usually for the purposes of marketing. In this essay I retool ghostwriting as a critical and creative writing practice. It may be a strategy to resist the administrative and corporate attempts to interfere with academic intellectual property rights. It turns intellectual work that little bit more subversive. First I reflect on the relation between writing and the commons of knowledge. I then perform ghostwriting as an experimental practice that can put different fields into dialogue, and which use intellectual culture as common property. I quote the first and last sentence of 20 books that begin by reflecting on ideas about ghosts; but more broadly reflect on critical theory, practice, and architecture in the time of the Anthropocene. Texts are adjusted so that they talk to one another and through one another. I problematize authorship while allowing the shadow of the original authorial voice to remain. What is important is that ghostwriting frees the creative process from the private property of the knowledge industry. Ghostwriting is collective. It treats the commons of knowledge as the collective memory of intellectual culture. I argue that ghostwriting can articulate a different type of knowledge practice as a collective mode of authorship without aura.

Introduction

“I was Manhattan’s ghostwriter.”

—Rem Koolhaas

In everyday use, ghostwriting is when a text is written by an unnamed author. Politicians, public figures, and celebrities come to mind as the primary users of ghostwriting. It is a writing practice generally understood as the way marketing shapes content. Ghostwritten texts aim to be persuasive, celebratory, perhaps deceptive. They are task oriented. They are clear, clean—too clean—and closed. Might there be a different way of practicing ghostwriting? Might ghostwriting be used against its corporate logic? Might there be an alternative open-ended type of ghostwriting, which is a critical and creative material practice? It would be a writing practice that intervenes in the information political economy to liberate knowledge; a type of practice that is material, speculative, and a challenge to the normative organisation of knowledge.

Ghostwriting displaces the author. It problematizes questions around individual and anonymous authorship, uniqueness and collectivity. Ghostwriting disrupts the notion of “intellectual property.” It treats texts and ideas as common property, not private property. Thought is public. Ideas are open. Everything is common. Concepts are there to be appropriated, used, reworked; reconfigured for another text, context, or project. Retooling ghostwriting as a critical knowledge practice may be a strategy to resist the administrative and corporate attempts to interfere with academic intellectual property rights. It turns intellectual work a little bit more subversive.

Ghostwriting could be in dialogue with what Walter Benjamin called literary-montage and what the Situationists called *détournement*. Those were approaches to writing that used pre-existing elements—texts, quotations, techniques, ideas—to produce a new work. In a montage, ideas remain unreconciled. They do not necessarily fuse into harmony. Thought is developed by the new arrangement of the pieces; their adjustments. Instead of theoretical closure, there is open-ended possibility.

Ghostwriting

Something is uncanny—that is how it begins. The strangely familiar. The anxiety of the ghostwriter confronted with the “soft” space of knowledge is then the manifestation of an uncanny based on the newly formulated conditions of interiority and exteriority of the

information political economy, where the “ghosting” of the “interior” of the imaginary and the exterior mirrors not the outward appearance of the individual author; but a world interior of the “knowledge economy,” the culture industry, cognitive capitalism.¹ Knowledge is commodified. There’s no time here, not any more. Energy, desire, imagination. To say that intellectual culture has been desolate is not to say that there were not traces of other possibilities such as ghostwriting a new intellectual common; the use-value of knowledge.²

Someone, you or me, individual or collective, comes forward and says: I would like to learn to live otherwise. They should learn to live by learning not how to make conversation with the ghost but how to talk with him or her, how to let them speak or how to give them back speech, even if it is in oneself, in the other, in the other in oneself: they are always there, specters, ghosts, multitudes; even if they do not exist, even if they are no longer, even if they are not yet.³ Why Postmodernism, again? Caught in these loops, we may eventually realize that if the “post” in postmodernism means anything, it means learning to live with ghosts, including the ghosts of futures past and present, the ghosts of others alive and dead, and with them, the ghosts of our former selves learning to think the thought called Utopia once again.⁴ It means thinking differently to act differently. In the time of the Anthropocene, there is no thought that is not technologically mediated, worked over by information, mediation; no city that is not without its specters. They converge in the general intellect, and the idea of the “Interior of Capital,” in which the driving force of mediation is remaking the city, the world, into a total interior.⁵ Nature, city, and culture are continuous. Natureculture.

Philosophers and philologists should be concerned in the first place with poetic metaphysics; that is, a look for proof not in the external world, but in the very modifications of the mind that meditates on it. The Globe again, technologically mediated, ghostlike and transparent, with no contents.⁶ The whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of information. It cannot be carried out, in other words, until individuals are “directly bound to universal history;” until dialogue has taken up bodies to impose its own conditions upon the world.⁷

The soul is the body. Flesh and word. Autonomy is a process without end.⁸ It is a collective project, forever incomplete. In a passage from the *Grundrisse* referred to as “The Fragment on Machines,” Marx emphasizes the ways in which abstract thought, considered in its autonomy from empirical conditioning, forges the forms of life that we find in late modernity. He calls it the general intellect. It is thought becoming social and technological; thought becomes collective. In this way, ghostwriting is a collective material practice that raises the awareness of the infinite possibility of appropriation, reproducibility, and

repeatability of texts, ideas, projects; bound to the irrefutable necessity of giving finitude and transience the form of authorship without aura in the finite time of the planet.⁹

The concept of “multitude,” as opposed to the more familiar concept of “people,” is a crucial tool for every careful analysis of the contemporary public sphere, a public sphere that is the commons of thought. How to operate on the commons of thought? Theory takes form in the commons, in the bodies of the multitude. Even absent-minded curiosity and non-referential idle talk is language, imagination, and attributes of the contemporary multitude: attributes loaded with ambivalence, naturally; but unavoidable attributes.¹⁰ Language is comparable to a symphony in that what the symphony is stands completely apart from how it is performed. Language is collective. The collectivity of the multitude does not enter any covenant, nor does it transfer its right to a sovereign, because it is composed of individual singularities: collective life is not a promise, but a premise.¹¹

Without thought going to the limit, no strategy, thus no tactic, no action, no real thinking or initiative, thus no writing, no music, no painting, no sculpture, no natureculture is possible. A revolutionary theory represents society in terms of its possible transformation by exposing relations of domination, whereas a theory of revolution indicates specific strategic principles: this is the task that falls to a revolutionary organization and to revolutionaries.¹² Disparate times call for disparate methods. We all know this civilization can’t last; let’s make another.¹³

Post-capitalists’ strategy right now is to render language (all that which signifies) abstract therefore easily manipulable. Yet for that same reason, language is material; it is a terrain of political action. The means to live and endure otherwise may already have come into existence, fettered though they are by outmoded relations and forms.¹⁴ What is the point of knowledge? Such a perspective calls for a mediating of the various kinds of knowledge of the component parts of totality to one another without the pretensions to mastery of any one field or discipline over all the others. It is a methodological and political principle.¹⁵ It is collective and collaborative. The nature that preceded human history no longer exists anywhere. It is nature entangled with labour, culture, technique, space, cities, machines, mediation. There is only one future: the direction must be towards a more egalitarian and collective life.¹⁶

All states, markets, economies, welfare systems, militaries, major religions, scientific breakthroughs, cultures, medical advances, wars, and the people that fought them came about during a uniquely stable period of Earth’s natural history. Stability is over. Together we can escape the ruins, charting a new way forward: a different future anchored in democracy,

justice, and mutual solidarity, in a world fit for life, in all its finitude and wonder.¹⁷ We live in troubled times. We need to stay with the trouble. Ghostwriters would not cease the layered, curious practice of becoming-with others, other texts, and other modes for a habitable, flourishing world.¹⁸ Ghostwriting is one way to intervene. Architecture is dead; long live architecture.¹⁹

Architecture tends to make an absolute separation between theory and practice, between analysis and synthesis. Might there be ways that architecture can make contact with other disciplinary practices, once again. Another pursuit may be to ghostwrite the city; to ghostwrite the third nature of mediation. The real voice of the ghostwriter breaks through the space trying to make evident the work of criticism or theoretical work as part of the work of a critical practice. It is another form of creativity.²⁰

Authorship without Aura

I approached this essay as an experiment in the practice of ghostwriting. I wanted to explore the creative possibilities of ghostwriting as an experimental material practice that can put different fields and ideas into dialogue. It meant using intellectual culture as a common resource and to use ghostwriting as a practice to create new relations between texts and modes of communication. It meant abiding by the rules set in the journal instructions: a text of no more than 2000 words with a limit of 20 references. I organised 20 books that I thought may be helpful. They are a mix of texts that begin with ideas about ghosts and specters; and texts that reflect on critical theory, practice, and architecture in the time of the Anthropocene. Texts are made to talk to one another and through one another. I started reading the books and quoted their first and last sentence. It created connections and disconnections, relations and gaps. I then adjusted—*détourned*—the quotes by adding or deleting a few selected words; by substituting and replacing keywords in a transformation process; then paragraphed the essay. It was enough to problematize authorship while still allowing the shadow of ideas to remain and the ghost of their author's voice.

There are other ways to perform ghostwriting, which may be more or less specific and targeted than my example here. It might be combining found fragments of texts and randomly selected lines, paragraphs, or pages around an arbitrary organisation. It might be a highly selective identification of words and texts to combine into a coherent order. What is important is that ghostwriting restores a recognisable part of the collective production of intellectual culture cutting into the present, by the recombination of fragments into a new whole. It frees the creative process from the private property of the knowledge industry.

Ghostwriting is collective. It treats the commons of knowledge as the collective memory of intellectual culture. Ghostwriting articulates the agency of theory in a material form and perhaps paradoxically, it suggests how knowledge can be comradely, relating to itself and to the world. Ghostwriting articulates a type of knowledge practice, which is a collective mode of authorship without aura.

Notes

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- ¹ Anthony Vidler (1992) *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
 - ² Mark Fisher (2014) *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*. Winchester: Zero Books.
 - ³ Jacques Derrida ([1993] 2006) *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. London: Routledge.
 - ⁴ Reinhold Martin (2010) *Utopia's Ghost: Architecture and Postmodernism, Again*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
 - ⁵ Libero Andreotti and Nadir Lahiji (2018) *The Architecture of Phantasmagoria: Specters of the City*. London; New York: Routledge.
 - ⁶ Rem Koolhaas ([1978] 1994) *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan*. New York: The Monacelli Press.
 - ⁷ Guy Debord ([1967] 1995) *The Society of the Spectacle*. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. New York: Zone Books.
 - ⁸ Franco Berardi (2009) *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy*. Trans. Francesca Cadel and Giuseppina Mecchia. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e); MIT Press.
 - ⁹ Paolo Virno ([1986] 2021) *Convention and Materialism: Uniqueness without Aura*. Trans. Lorenzo Chiesa. Cambridge: MIT Press.
 - ¹⁰ Paolo Virno ([2001] 2004) *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*. Trans. Isabella Bertolotti, James Cascaito, and Andrea Casson. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e).
 - ¹¹ Paolo Virno ([2003] 2015) *When the Word Becomes Flesh: Language and Human Nature*. Trans. Giuseppina Mecchia. South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e).
 - ¹² Maurizio Lazzarato (2021) *Capital Hates Everyone: Fascism or Revolution*. Trans. Robert Hurley. Cambridge, MA: Semiotext(e).
 - ¹³ McKenzie Wark (2016) *Molecular Red: Theory for the Anthropocene*. London; New York: Verso.
 - ¹⁴ McKenzie Wark (2019) *Capital Is Dead: Is This Something Worse?*. London; New York: Verso.
 - ¹⁵ McKenzie Wark (2020) *Sensoria: Thinkers for the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Verso.
 - ¹⁶ John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark, and Richard York (2010) *The Ecological Rift: Capitalism's War on the Earth*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
 - ¹⁷ Mathew Lawrence and Laurie Laybourn-Langton (2021) *Planet on Fire: A Manifesto for the Age of Environmental Breakdown*. London; New York: Verso.
 - ¹⁸ Donna J. Haraway (2016) *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham: Duke University Press.
 - ¹⁹ Susannah Hagan (2022) *Revolution? Architecture and the Anthropocene*. London: Lund Humphries.
 - ²⁰ Diana Agrest (1991) *Architecture from Without: Theoretical Framings for a Critical Practice*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.