

The Ghosts of Capitalism in Kathrin Röggla's *wir schlafen nicht* (2004) and Isaac Rosa's *La habitación oscura* (2013)

Daniel López Fernández

Abstract

The deregulation and flexibilization of the labor market at the center of the neoliberal employment policies and the post-Fordist dissolution of previous management strategies based on direct control mechanisms and on stable labor-capital relationships have often been deemed as liberating measures for workers. However, the psychological toll on workers of unregulated labor markets and job conditions, ineffective measures on unemployment, the constant fear of job loss and the increased accountability for their performance has manifested itself in the form of anxiety, sleeplessness, self-exploitation or a profound pessimism and a retreat from communal forms of resistance.

In Kathrin Röggla's novel *wir schlafen nicht* (2004), the demands of flexible capitalism have reached uncanny repercussions. The coercive mechanisms that arise through the subjection to neoliberal working rules have turned the workers into ghosts alienated from themselves, who in search of better and secure job positions have exploited themselves to the verge of mental collapse, barely staying awake through caffeine abuse and other stimulant substances. On a formal level, forms of unrealistic linguistic patterns like the exclusive use of indirect speech or the absence of the interviewer's questions evoke the impression of a 'ghost novel'. Thus, the desire to achieve professional excellence and stability in a post-Fordist neoliberal job market seems to come at the cost of mental health, physical well-being, and one's one identity.

In Isaac Rosa's *La habitación oscura* (2013), the crisis of capitalism has created a different type of ghosts. Following the financial crisis in 2008 and the detrimental effects it had on the Spanish economy, the protagonists of Rosa's novel have decided to temporarily isolate themselves from the outside world in a dark room. They gradually become spectres of a reality they are trying to escape. The four walls of the dark room are not enough to protect them from the harsh economic conditions, and their desire to create a closed community prevents them from actually engaging with larger communities outside, capable of articulating an enduring and organised resistance.

Keywords: Post-Fordism, Neoliberalism, Kathrin Röggla, Isaac Rosa, Ghosts.

Introduction

In *Monsters of the Market*, David McNally asserts that “we live in an age of monsters and of the body-panics they incite” with “seemingly endless numbers of vampire- and zombie-films and novels” flooding the markets.¹ The same narrative could be applied to

Daniel López Fernández is a PhD candidate at the University of Valencia, where he works as a research assistant in the Department of English and German.

the figure of the ghost, whose relentlessness and persistence has accompanied us through time and cultures. María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren claim that popular culture and everyday life are haunted by ghosts, whether figurative or non-figurative; we live with them and have become accustomed to their existence.² And yet, despite its seemingly overall ‘presence’, the ghost has the capacity to disturb our understanding of reality, to remove the veil with which often unpleasant images are covered and to manifest that which had to remain hidden.

As McNally points out, cultural images of vampires, zombies, or ghosts are salient representations of the structural (and therefore concealed) mechanisms of global capitalism and the corporal vulnerabilities they produce.³ They are not mere metaphors, but markers and signifiers of the labour exploitation on which the capitalist system is based. As such, they disturb the naturalisation of capitalism and the social relations it entails and help visualise the disruptive forces of capital. For this very reason, Karl Marx himself employed images of vampires and zombies to describe the subsumption of labour force under capitalism, which in classical economics had been embellished as a peaceful division of labour and exchange process based on mutual agreement and benefit. In *Das Kapital*, Marx de-fetishises capitalism by exposing how capital feeds of the surplus-value of workers to transform it into giant systems of machinery intended to further exploit labour. Dead labour (the means of production created by past labour) comes to dominate living labour (the concrete productive activity under capitalism). As if in a zombie tale, Marx explains that in awakening dead labour, living labour effectively raises it from death. But, in so doing, this re-animated labour also alienates and deadens the living by means of exploitation. At the same time, this process of capital accumulation implies a vampire-like system. “Capital”, Marx asserts, “is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks.”⁴ Quoting Engels, Marx describes the capitalist process of production as a vampire that will not lose its hold on the worker “while there remains a single muscle, sinew or drop of blood to be exploited.”⁵

Ghosts have a disruptive and revelatory power. The ghost breaks in and irremediably alters our reality by showing us to what extent it is nothing more than the surface of something much more complex. The Greek etymology is illuminating in this regard. The word *phántasma*⁶ (φάντασμα) comes from the verb *phainō* (φαίνω), which means to “make known, reveal, bring to light” and also to “appear, shine forth.” It is

This research was funded by the Spanish Conselleria de Innovación, Ciencia y Sociedad Digital of the Generalitat Valenciana and by the European Social Fund (ESF) as part of the grant “Subvenciones para la contratación de personal investigador predoctoral” (CIACIF/2021/110).

¹ David McNally, *Monsters of the Market: Zombies, Vampires and Global Capitalism* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011), p. 1.

² María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren, ‘Introduction’, in *Popular Ghosts: The Haunted Spaces of Everyday Culture*, ed. María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren (New York and London: Continuum, 2010), pp. ix-x.

³ McNally, *Monsters*, p. 2.

⁴ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Volume I (London: Penguin Books, 1982), p. 342

⁵ Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I, p. 416.

⁶ Here I have decided to trace the etymology of the word ‘phantasm’ or ‘phantom’ instead of ‘ghost’ since, in my opinion, the former provides a much richer web of meanings having been used in ancient Greek and Roman philosophy and later by modern authors like Jacques Derrida.

related to the nouns *phôs* (φῶς), “light”, *phainómeno* (φαινόμενο), “a thing or being perceptible through senses”, and *phantasiā* (φαντασίᾱ), “a product of the imagination”, “image, appearance”.⁷ By definition, the ghost is a being that appears in our reality, becoming perceptible, and through its apparition sheds light on something, reveals what was before unknown or concealed, thus altering decisively the fabric of existence.

Perhaps the ghost was always there, but the lights of capitalist modernity hindered its visibility. Only in darkness can the ghost manifest itself, its appearance be perceptible. The perpetual brightness associated with capitalism makes it difficult to see spectres. As Robert Kurz explains, the capitalist mode of production cannot tolerate the unproductive hours of darkness.⁸ Similarly, Jonathan Crary argues that the 24/7 temporality of late capitalism produces “a world identical to itself, a world with the shallowest of pasts, and thus in principle without specters.”⁹ But the over-presence of light doesn’t make ghosts vanish, it just hides them momentarily.

wir schlafen nicht (*we never sleep*, 2004) by Kathrin Röggla and *La habitación oscura* (*The Dark Room*, 2013) by Isaac Rosa are two different but interrelated novels in which ghosts come to the fore and reveal the truths that the capitalist mode of production and its working world try to exorcise. These ghosts do not appear at first glance to be part of our world, and yet they manifest themselves and have an effect on us. They constitute critical figures that reveal the underlying structures, functioning and effects of capitalism. Far from being a solid construct, reality is full of rifts and ruptures from which ghosts can appear. The value of these literary works resides precisely on staging an epistemological crisis, on revealing to the reader via the figure of the ghost the subjacent socio-economic processes that affect us on both a physical and a psychological level.

Ghostly Phenomena: The Haunting of Capitalist Realism

In his famous essay “The End of History?”, written in 1989 right before the fall of the Berlin Wall, Francis Fukuyama claimed that the demise of the communist states and the victory of liberalism had put an end to history, which he conceived as mankind’s ideological evolution. Western liberal democracy had come to assert itself as the only possible form of human government, from which there can be no progression into an alternative system.¹⁰ While Fukuyama’s thesis has been widely criticised over the decades, it persists as a culturally and unconsciously accepted idea. Five years later, Fredric Jameson wrote: “It seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism.”¹¹

That idea served as a foundation for what Mark Fisher called ‘capitalist realism’: “the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic

⁷ James Diggle et al., *The Cambridge Greek Lexicon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 1452-1453.

⁸ Robert Kurz, ‘Die Diktatur der abstrakten Zeit. Arbeit als Verhaltensstörung der Moderne’, in *Feierabend! Elf Attacken gegen die Arbeit*, ed. Robert Kurz, Ernst Lohoff and Norbert Trenkle (Hamburg: Konkret Literatur Verlag, 1999), p. 25.

⁹ Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London and New York: Verso, 2013), p. 19.

¹⁰ Francis Fukuyama, ‘The End of History?’, *The National Freedom*, no. 16 (Summer 1989), pp. 3-18.

¹¹ Fredric Jameson, ‘Introduction’, in *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. xii.

system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it.”¹² Fisher sees capitalism as bound up with an ideological fundamentalism, as expressed in Margaret Thatcher’s slogan ‘There is no alternative’ (TINA). Capitalism is thought to be an inevitable outcome of history and even inherent to human nature, so that any other political system or suggestion for change is deemed ‘unrealistic’.

As Fisher observes, “emancipatory politics must always destroy the appearance of a ‘natural order’, must reveal what is presented as necessary and inevitable to be a mere contingency, just as it must make what was previously deemed to be impossible seem attainable.”¹³ Drawing on Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytical theory via Slavoj Žižek, he draws a distinction between the ‘Real’ and ‘reality’. “For Lacan”, he explains, “the Real is what any ‘reality’ must suppress; indeed, reality constitutes itself through just this repression. The Real is an unrepresentable X, a traumatic void that can only be glimpsed in the fractures and inconsistencies in the field of apparent reality. So one strategy against capitalist realism could involve invoking the Real(s) underlying the reality that capitalism presents to us.”¹⁴

Ghosts are precisely the manifestation of the Real, for they reveal (*phainō*) a hidden phenomenon (*phainómeno*) behind the curtain of reality. The ghost appears to bring something to light (*phōs*), to show that the structure of the world cannot be totalised and must be understood as manifold and fractured. Ghosts are symptoms of an anomaly within the system. Hence the best way of encapsulating the gist of an epoch is perhaps, as Žižek explains, “to focus not on the explicit features that define its social and ideological edifices but on the disavowed ghosts that haunt it, dwelling in a mysterious region of nonexisting entities which none the less *persist*, continue to exert their efficacy.”¹⁵ Ghosts are repressed elements from reality that have returned to the surface in order to haunt it. They represent the uncanny, that which “was meant to remain secret and hidden and has come into the open.”¹⁶

Every epoch has its own ghosts. Even Fukuyama’s discourse was haunted by those possibilities and alternatives that could not be entirely suppressed and, like ghosts, would persist and insist in their existence. Jacques Derrida thus incited us to go beyond the opposition between reality and the Real, the real and the unreal, the living and the non-living, being and non-being.¹⁷ More crucially, he exhorted us to “learn to live *with* ghosts”,¹⁸ to establish a dialogue with the ghosts and not to lay them to rest. These haunting phenomena challenge the consistency of capitalist realism. The ghosts that appear in Röggl’s *wir schlafen nicht* and Rosa’s *La habitación oscura* challenge the ideological surface of everyday life in a capitalist society, haunted by monstrous

¹² Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester and Washington: zero books, 2009), p. 2.

¹³ Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, p. 17.

¹⁴ Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, p. 18.

¹⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute: Or, Why Is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (London and New York: Verso, 2001), p. 3. Emphasis in original.

¹⁶ Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 132. Freud quotes here F. W. Schelling’s thoughts in *Philosophie der Mythologie*.

¹⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), p. 12.

¹⁸ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, pp. xvii-xviii. Emphasis in original.

apparitions it cannot contain. These novels present a ‘hauntology’, as Derrida called it,¹⁹ an ontology haunted by spectres. The present article will try to conjure up the ghosts in Rögglä and Rosa, to analyse them, to elucidate what kind of phenomenon they attest to, what kind of impression or image (*phantasiā*) they form and what lies behind their apparition.

Kathrin Rögglä’s *wir schlafen nicht* (2004)

Kathrin Rögglä, born in 1971 in Salzburg and based in Berlin since 1992, has developed a distinguished career in the German speaking literary scene over the last three decades. Her multifaceted *oeuvre* encompasses radio plays, dramas, essays and, above all, novels: *niemand lacht rückwärts* (1995), *abrauschen* (1997), *irres wetter* (2000), *die alarmbereiten* (2010) or *Nachtsendung* (2016), to name a few. Her works, nevertheless, defy definitive and uncomplicated categorizations into particular literary genres. *Wir schlafen nicht* (2004), for instance, appeared almost simultaneously as a novel, a theatre play and a radio play.

For this novel, one of her most prominent works, Rögglä conducted 40 interviews between 2001 and 2003 with consultants, business coaches, software engineers, journalists, and interns, which together build a representative ensemble of the stratigraphy of the consultancy working world, a sociological peer-group of the prevalence of neoliberal ideology inside the business economy. The author compacted, recontextualised and defamiliarised this raw material to create six characters: Silke Mertens, a key account manager; Nicole Damaschke, the intern; Andrea Bülow, online editor; Sven, IT support; Oliver Hannes Bender, senior associate; and Mr. Gehringer, the partner.

From the outset, the novel presents the façade of documentarism, which is gradually undermined as the ‘narrative’ moves forward and the ghosts manifest themselves. The six characters, workers of different pay and hierarchy levels in a business consultancy company, are at a job fair, where they are inquired by an interviewer whose identity remains unknown to the reader throughout the novel and whose questions are omitted from text. The questions are only to be reconstructed from repetitions²⁰ and from the interviewee’s answers, as they talk about their work rhythms, their attitude towards their job field, their private life and lifestyle or their coping mechanisms. The ‘presence’ of the interviewer/narrator is merely observable in the use of the subjunctive modus (*Konjunktiv I*) through the recourse to indirect speech, which dominates the text and is used in the novel to supposedly transcribe the speeches of the protagonists previously recorded in an audio tape. The apparent documentary character and authenticity of the text is further emphasised by the employment of paratactic sentences, multiple modal particles, anglicisms pertaining to the business world, syntactic improprieties, meaningless and invented word compounds, and by the exclusive use of the lower case letters.²¹

¹⁹ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 10.

²⁰ The characters in the novel sometimes repeat the question that the interviewer supposedly has asked before answering it, which allows the reader to better comprehend the reply.

²¹ Cf. Christian Kremer, *Milieu und Performativität Deutsche Gegenwartsprosa von John von Düffel, Georg M. Oswald und Kathrin Rögglä* (Marburg: Tectum Verlag, 2008), pp. 115-121; Maria Loreto Vilar, ‘Economía de la empresa en la literatura posmoderna: Kathrin Rögglä’, *Cuadernos de Filología Alemana*, vol. 18, no. 3 (2010), p. 314.

Röggla's 'fieldwork' and creative method are replicated in the novel, in so far as her literary counterpart seeks to achieve what she pursued in real life. In her interviews and conversations with representants of the post-Fordist workplace, her stated goal was to expose a friction between ideology and experience, discourse and practice. To this end, Röggla adopted a distant attitude towards her conversation partners which she called "hysteric affirmation",²² destined to drive the interlocutors into their own flawed and contradictory rhetoric by way of letting them talk without interruption, with only minimal guidance. Röggla consequently conceives language as a fundamental tool for ideology criticism.²³

In the novel, despite the interview background, the characters for the most part seem to almost ignore the presence of the interviewer/narrator and, prompted by their questions, build up conversations between themselves that initially constitute a polyphonous paean of praise of their white-collar working environment,²⁴ but that quickly turn into (un)conscious revelations of the physical and affective brutalities on which this work world relies. As the novel progresses and the characters reveal more about their precarious work-life balance, the idea of spectrality comes to the fore. It's important to mention here that the presence of 'capitalist monsters' (zombies, ghosts, uncanny manifestations, and so forth), to employ McNally's term, in Röggla's *wir schlafen nicht* has been object of academic discussion before.²⁵ Furthermore, Röggla is highly self-reflexive and many of her theoretical contributions analyse her own methodology, authorial intentions and stylistic devices, including the notion of spectrality/ghostliness present in this novel.²⁶ However, in most of these contributions the figure of the ghost isn't explored in depth as a central literary device through which capitalist realism can be undermined, paying attention to the meanings that underlie its etymological roots, its forms of apparition or its effects on our reality.

All six characters find themselves, as they reveal to the interviewer and to us as readers, in a deadly vicious circle of (self)exploitation, which they are more often than not unwilling to admit. Faced with the underlying danger of job cuts, the anxiety-driven

²² Céline Kaiser and Alexander Böhnke, 'Die gouvernementalen Strukturen. Kathrin Röggla im Gespräch', *Navigationen*, no. 4 (2004). At: <https://www.kathrin-roeggla.de/text/interview-navigationen-siegener-beitrag-zur-medien-und-kulturwissenschaft>. Accessed 26/08/2023.

²³ Cf. Karin Krauthausen, "ob das jetzt das interview sei?" Das konjunktivische Interview in Kathrin Röggla's Roman *wir schlafen nicht*. At: <https://www.kathrin-roeggla.de/text/karin-krauthausen-ob-das-jetzt-das-interview-sei>. Accessed 28/08/2023.

²⁴ Nicole Damaschke, the intern, does present a more critical voice. She criticises the lack of upward mobility inside the business world and its excessive reliance on social capital. While at the beginning of the novel she desperately tries to get into this closed world, she quickly acknowledges the physical and mental toll that the neoliberalist work culture exacts on its workers and decides to leave the company. Nevertheless, her decision can hardly be described as a liberating act, since the lack of job opportunities that she complains about does not provide a clear escape route.

²⁵ Cf. Kremer, *Milieu und Performativität*, p. 116; Paul Jandl, 'Vom Lebensgefühl der Untoten. Kathrin Röggla's Roman *wir schlafen nicht*', At: <https://www.kathrin-roeggla.de/text/vom-lebensgefuehl-der-untoten>. Accessed 26/08/2023; David Clarke, 'The Capitalist Uncanny in Kathrin Röggla's *wir schlafen nicht*: Ghosts in the Machine', *Angermion*, vol. 4 (2011), pp. 147-163; Elaine Martin, 'New-Economy Zombies: Kathrin Röggla's *wir schlafen nicht*', in *Transitions: Emerging Women Writers in German-language Literature*, ed. Valerie Heffernan and Gillian Pye (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013), pp. 131-148.

²⁶ Cf. Kathrin Röggla, *Gespensterarbeit, Krisenmanagement und Weltmarktfiktion* (Picus Verlag: Wien, 2009).

working pace and the inability to stop being productive, they enter into a pernicious competition against each other and other possible competitors. They embody Günter Voß' and Hans Pongratz's definition of the *Arbeitskraftunternehmer* ('workforce employer'), which in their view is the dominant type of employee in the culture of late capitalism, characterised by an increased economization of all life activities and working capacities and by an intensified management and monitoring of the own activities, i.e., active self-control instead of passively fulfilling external and structured requirements.²⁷ Voß' and Pongratz's concept shares many similarities with Richard Sennett's description of 'flexible capitalism', in which workers are asked "to be open to change on short notice, to take risks continually, to become ever less dependent on regulations and formal procedures"²⁸ in order to adjust to the demands set by the neoliberal labour market. These changes in the working world correspond to the dissolution of the Fordist work organization, reliant on repetitive work patterns but also on stable worker-capital relations, and its replacement by the post-Fordist mode of production, marked by flexibilization and deregulation.

Especially relevant to the theorizations of post-Fordism and to the working world presented by Rögglä, is the concept of time. The idea of time as a regulator of work-life balance seems to be obsolete. Work has absorbed all leisure and non-productive time. Employees are expected to work fourteen or sixteen hours, day and night. Sleep is consequently seen as a waste of time. Workers try to stay awake as long as possible and, in their competition with other peers, even proudly confess to the interviewer how little they can function without sleep. The senior associate assures he has gotten used to sleeping for only three hours a day,²⁹ and the IT technician deems a "genetical defect" the fact that people cannot "store" sleep or transfer it to other people, while the key account manager denies the "sanctity of sleep"³⁰ and considers military experiments on sleep deprivation to be adaptable to the work routine.

They are physically and mentally incapable to stop working. To go on vacation or take a leave of absence is considered more stressful than the exhausting and interminable work schedule. The senior associate allegedly had panic attacks during his vacation period, the key account manager could not stop calling the office to see if everything was in order and the partner simply laughs about the possibility of not working. Constant availability and productivity are imperatives. Leisure is practically non-existent. With the merging of traditionally separate areas of work and private life in favour of the former, personal relationships are also jeopardised. The partner maintains a long-distance relationship with his own family, which already puts him in a better position than his subordinates, who seem to have sworn off affective relationships as something impossible to maintain alongside their work rhythm. Families, friends, or partners are a burden that needs to be lifted to make time for the frantic pace of work.

²⁷ Günter Voß and Hans Pongratz, 'Der Arbeitskraftunternehmer. Eine neue Grundform der Ware Arbeitskraft?', *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, no. 1 (1998), pp. 131-158.

²⁸ Richard Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character. The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998), p. 8.

²⁹ Rögglä, *wir schlafen nicht* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2019 [2004]), p. 34.

³⁰ Rögglä, *wir schlafen nicht*, p. 178.

They all deny having an addiction to their jobs, but it would be too simplifying to see this a mere phenomenon of overidentification and corporativism, simply overcome by a change of ‘mentality’. The characters in Rögglä’s novel are entrapped in a labyrinth whose escape routes are not recognisable, and freedom appears as a chimera. The ever-present threat of dismissals, the increased flexibility required from workers, and the heavy burden of constant self-control has alienated the workers to the point of physical self-harm and mental exhaustion.

To keep up with the demands of the post-Fordist workplace, the interviewees in *wir schlafen nicht* resort to alcohol during working hours, stimulants like coffee, or performance-enhancing drugs such as dexedrine, ephedrine or amphetamine. The ceaseless urge of productivity combined with substance abuse have provoked devastating side effects on the workers lives. The partner tells the interviewer that one day, out of the blue, he lost his ability to talk, which, given the emphasis that post-Fordism places on communication and information, basically equals a career dead-end.³¹ The IT technician confesses that he suffers from depression and various physical conditions like frequent flus, nausea, or headaches. Circulatory and nervous breakdowns are also the order of the day. Memory has been decisively affected as well. None of the protagonists are sure about when particular events have happened, they constantly lose the train of thought during the interviews, can’t recognise people whom they already know, and in general they seem to experience different degrees of memory loss.

The atmosphere and the characters themselves become uncannier. The surface of reality is scratched by ghostly phenomena that haunt the closed world of the business consultants, uncanny manifestations of Real capitalist dynamics marked by disturbances, violence, and even death. In a particular scene, the sound of helicopters and the image of people running in panic disturbs the hermetic finance microcosm in which the six protagonists work. They are incapable of locating these disconcerting images within their previous experience, so their defence mechanism is to immediately go back to work.³²

In another scene, the key account manager finds a phone in her purse that doesn’t belong to her and from which she can hear an eerie voice. As she later tries to use the phone, she recognises the voice of the IT technician, who is however standing right beside her, as if she was hearing sounds from another dimension. She also sees on numerous occasions an unknown woman who momentarily appears and stares at her before quickly disappearing again. Perhaps this woman is someone whom she has hurt in the past, possibly even killed, as she says to herself, and who now comes back to haunt her.³³

Just as uncertain about the possibility of having killed someone is the partner. Towards the end of the novel, he recalls a vague memory about a dead body he found in an empty office, but can’t remember the identity of the body or the cause of death. Even more unsure are the characters about their own state of ‘life’. The IT technician and the online editor silently disappear in the last chapters, never to be seen again, perhaps only heard as ghostly voices. The key account manager even asks herself if she is slowly

³¹ Rögglä, *wir schlafen nicht*, p. 107.

³² Rögglä, *wir schlafen nicht*, pp. 182-183.

³³ Rögglä, *wir schlafen nicht*, p. 167.

turning into a ghost.³⁴ They have figuratively and literally become ghosts, spectres of their own selves following the damaging demands imposed on the flexible, self-exploitative *Arbeitskraftunternehmer* in an ultra-competitive working environment. More than likely, they're already dead, as the senior associate thinks.³⁵ If, as Plato explained, *phántasma* are that which “appears the way the thing does but in fact isn't like it”³⁶ or, in other words, an appearance that takes the place of another thing by means of resemblance, it could be argued that the characters in Rögglä's novel are revealed to be ghosts that, as such, appear to replace their old selves and to introduce an anomaly into the surface of reality, haunting the seemingly self-evident ideology underpinning the late capitalist mode of production. Plato's *phántasma* has been aptly translated as ‘simulacrum’, since it entails a form of deception: a non-entity assumes the form of that which exists to replace it, what ultimately transforms our conception of reality. That's why we recognise in the ghost the features of who once was but can't be anymore since he/she passed away. Linked to this, Guy Debord's notion of spectacle is insightful regarding the links between capitalism and spectrality. In *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord argues that life under the capitalist mode of production is organised as “an immense accumulation of spectacles”,³⁷ which means that social relations between people are mediated by images, by simulacra. Similarly, Jean Baudrillard contends that modern experience in capitalist societies is defined by a ‘hyperrealism’, according to which reality is in fact a representation where the succession of simulacra has replaced real things.³⁸ Debord's and Baudrillard's analysis, when applied to the post-Fordist organization of work, evince not only the substitution of real work for the generation of representations of work, for ‘performative acts’,³⁹ but also how *phántasma* have replaced ‘real people’. Post-Fordist working environments and neoliberal policies produce ghosts, simulacra deprived of identity or subjectivity. Ghosts, as they appear in Rögglä's novel, defy closed oppositions between ‘real’ and ‘not real’. They defy the logics of capitalist realism; they should not exist, yet they manifest themselves.

Rögglä unites the content of the novel with formal concerns. As explained before, the novel gives the impression of being the indirect transcription of recorded interviews. Given that the characters appear as ghosts, *wir schlafen nicht* reads as a collection of electronic voice phenomena, sounds coming from spectres hidden in our reality that have manifested themselves in order to alter our perception of it. The interviewer/narrator can therefore be seen as a spiritualist medium that has channelled or communed these ghosts for us to see/hear.⁴⁰ In the penultimate chapter of the book, these ghosts nevertheless rebel

³⁴ Rögglä, *wir schlafen nicht*, p. 197.

³⁵ Rögglä, *wir schlafen nicht*, p. 203.

³⁶ Plato, ‘Sophist’, in *Plato: Complete Works* (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), p. 236b.

³⁷ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (London: Rebel Press, 2014), p. 7.

³⁸ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994), pp. 1-3.

³⁹ Cf. Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, pp. 39-54; David Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018). This valuing of symbols of achievement over actual achievement is also at work in *wir schlafen nicht*. The senior associate, for example, likes to present himself as an overachiever young urban professional who leads a “yuppie-high-flyer” life but whose actual role in the company remains unclear.

⁴⁰ Krauthausen, ‘ob das jetzt das interview sei?’

against the interviewer who has channelled them, they rebel against his/her “liveliness”,⁴¹ which contrasts with their own uncertainty about life and death. They demand to go back to the clueless normality of work life, despite its devastating effects. In the last chapter, the interviewer explicitly intervenes for the first time, forced to grant them their wish. He/she decides, contrary to Derrida’s advice, to let go of the ghosts. But the haunting is still at work, the apparition of the Real cannot be so easily suppressed, and capitalist realism has been shattered in tiny pieces that do not fit together anymore.

Isaac Rosa’s *La habitación oscura*

The novels by Isaac Rosa participate, for the most part, in the thematic turn that has shifted the cultural panorama in Spain since the 2007-2008 financial crisis. While prior to this the collective memory of the Civil War had functioned as the dominant cultural paradigm in literary production, an increasing number of prose texts, categorised as ‘precarious narratives’ or ‘crisis novels’, have dealt with the socioeconomic inequalities and the affective effects on middle and lower classes produced by the economic crisis at the end of the noughties.⁴²

La habitación oscura (2013), probably Rosa’s most renowned work, perfectly illustrates the author’s interests in a socially conscious and politically engaged literary tradition and a culture that questions dominant orthodoxies, especially neoliberal rationality, and contributes to the disruption of established powers, in tune with contemporary popular movements such as the Spanish 15-M or Occupy Wall Street, as will be explained later. The novel centres around a group of friends who, fifteen years ago from the present time in the novel, decided to build a dark room in a multifunctional space they rented. Over the years, as the economic situation in Spain fluctuates and correspondingly the personal lives of the protagonists undergo major transformations, the significance that these protagonists ascribe to their secret dark room also changes.

The dark room is initially conceived as a place of pleasure in which to have casual, anonymous sex with each other and without consequences, a mixture of play and transgression. It is a jovial period of time, characterised by a youthful and upbeat hedonism. All protagonists enjoy a relatively carefree life and think of themselves as part of the ascendant urban middle class, even though they do not earn much money and suffer from already tenuous employment contracts. Long lists of payment methods and commercial documents (“invoices, purchases, card payments, refunds, subscriptions, the twist of that score in which no digit ever remains the same”)⁴³ together with consumerist choices (concerts, restaurants, cheap flights to European capitals, hotels) reflect a lapse of Spanish economic history when young people were self-sufficient and avid to participate in the consumerist frenzy.

⁴¹ Rögglä, *wir schlafen nicht*, p. 216.

⁴² Cf. David Becerra Mayor, *Convocando al fantasma. Novela crítica en la España actual* (Madrid: Tierradenadie Ediciones, 2015); Christian Claesson, *Narrativas precarias: Crisis y subjetividad en la cultura española actual* (Gijón: Hoja de Lata, 2019).

⁴³ Isaac Rosa, *La habitación oscura* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 2013), p. 47. All translations from the text are my own.

Rosa's characters thus embody the *Zeitgeist* of the new post-Francoist democracy. During the eighties and nineties, the Spanish State, according to official narratives, went through an unprecedented cycle of capitalist accumulation and prosperity, with very positive macroeconomic indicators.⁴⁴ This euphoric point of view was able to seduce Spanish public opinion. The so-called economic miracle mainly concerned rich populational segments and business elites. The protagonists of *La habitación oscura* represent this sociocultural imaginary, as they indulge in consumerism, casual sex, and superficial laughs. Rosa underscores the substanceless superficiality of this lifestyle by presenting the first part of his narrative through the prism of a television show: "the memory of those years has a sound background of laughter, as if the dark room were the main set of a sitcom."⁴⁵ The novel, therefore, critiques a whole generation that far from committing politically to the construction of a different society, participated in the uplift of a blind society, incapable of turning on a light bulb to see in the dark the objective functioning of capitalism. If the blinding lights of capitalism do not allow us to see the ghosts, it is also true that complete darkness can be disabling. In its optimum degree, light (*phôs*) is what makes it possible for them to be seen. If they appear (*phainō*), is because we can see them, they are a phenomenon (*phainómeno*) perceptible through our sight.

Soon the economic collapse intrudes slowly but steadily into their lives. As a kind of ghostly phenomenon, thought to be the product of fantasy (*phantasiā*) or delusion, the real consequences of the capitalist mode of production permeate reality and destroy the characters' previous horizon of middle-class hopes. It is not a sudden plummet towards a generalised state of vulnerability and insecurity, but a gradual deflation of that deceptive scenario of socioeconomic progress that seemed endless. The economic crisis is metaphorically described in the novel as a war conflict, of which the protagonists are at first mere spectators. They talk from a distance about families being evicted, long queues before soup kitchens, or fights over discarded food from supermarket chains. As one of the narrators puts it, "we had gone down several steps, but we were still on the ladder",⁴⁶ consuming less, but still consuming: white-label products, downloaded movies, vacations on the family house. However, after having emerged unharmed from the first bombardments, the projectiles begin to hit them. Raúl is fired from his job as a salesperson for a travel wholesaler; Sonia cannot find a job as a sociocultural animator and is forced to work underpaid hours as a caterer; Eva commits suicide after years of precarious work coupled with depression. These personal stories show the new context of precariousness and the psychic harm it causes. The crisis is revealed as a multidimensional process that goes beyond the purely socioeconomic sphere, affecting the process of subjectivation as precariousness establishes itself as a constitutive quality of the subject.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Isidro López and Emmanuel Rodríguez, *Fin de ciclo: financiarización, territorio y sociedad de propietarios en la onda larga del capitalismo hispano (1959-2010)* (Madrid: Traficantes de Sueños, 2010), p. 179.

⁴⁵ Rosa, *La habitación oscura*, p. 43. The stylistic device of presenting financial prosperity as a sitcom resonates with Debord's and Baudrillard's ideas mentioned earlier. The economic upturn is, as explained above, undermined in the novel by exposing it as a mere process of capitalist accumulation that doesn't reduce socioeconomic inequalities but rather thrives upon their aggravation.

⁴⁶ Rosa, *La habitación oscura*, p. 138.

⁴⁷ Eduardo Matos-Martín, 'Del bienestar al derrumbe económico en *La habitación oscura* de Isaac Rosa: milagro, precariedad, protesta', *Orillas*, vol. 10 (2021), p. 139.

Facing the collapse of their materialistic aspirational goals and the anxieties resulting from economic uncertainty, the protagonists in Rosa's novel start using the dark room as a refuge, a hideout in which to temporarily escape from the harsh conditions of the outside world. In so doing, they also alienate themselves from this world. In a sense, they turn into ghosts, hidden in the dark but not appearing. Laughter has given way to crying and desperate screaming. But in spite of their anger and resentment, they do not conceive political engagement as a possible solution to their problems. Secretly, they wish everything to be as it was before the crisis, to go back to their numb state with middle-class preoccupations. Silvia, who, contrary to the other inhabitants of the dark room, takes great effort in finding practical political solutions to current inequalities, reproaches their passivity. She insists on opening up their space for communal purposes and using it in coalition with activist groups.

The emergence of Silvia as a key character halfway through the narrative ultimately means another change of meaning of the dark room itself. On Silvia's instigation, the other members of the room reluctantly agree to turn it into a designated space for activism. The anguish and uncertainty caused by the crisis can function, as the novel demonstrates, as a mechanism for reactivating agency capacity and transformative drive. The dark room is resemanticised as a hideout for hacktivists. Especially Silvia and Jesús, the more militant members of the group, are involved in doxing personal and compromising videos of top executives from large companies, with the intention of "switching the side of fear."⁴⁸ What ought to remain hidden, must come to light. Silvia argues that what they do is illegal but legitimate because it merely replicates an already common procedure of surveillance performed against workers.⁴⁹

The hacktivism of the group, in conjunction with other forms of engagement such as mass demonstrations, picketing, or public assemblies, reflects the spirit of the Spanish 15-M, a civic movement which since 2011 protested against the political two-party system, social program cutbacks and state bailouts of banks. This movement gathered a lot of followers and public support, and it was still very popular when Rosa wrote *La habitación oscura*. The 15-M movement was linked to an international network of activists, including the 2008 Greek riots, Occupy Wall Street, Arab Spring and even Anonymous.⁵⁰ The political projects it originated were promising, but ultimately failed to achieve meaningful and permanent changes in the Spanish political panorama.

Ten years later, the optimism with which *La habitación oscura* viewed the reformist atmosphere of its time (without denying its own problems and contradictions) may be read as a nostalgic trip to the past. But it is important not to fall into what Wendy Brown called 'left melancholy', a kind of leftist melancholic resignation that has given up on hopefulness to indulge in its own marginality and failure; a resigned Left "whose spirit is

⁴⁸ Rosa, *La habitación oscura*, p. 183.

⁴⁹ Rosa, *La habitación oscura*, p. 177.

⁵⁰ While the links between the Spanish 15-M and Anonymous are tenuous and often hard to trace, the stated philosophy and hacktivist practice of the group resonate with some of the members of the dark room in Rosa's novel.

ghostly, whose structure of desire is backward looking and punishing”.⁵¹ A different kind of phantasmagorical ‘spiritism’ is needed.

Conclusion

When considering the transformative possibilities of looking at and acting upon the political-economic reality depicted, albeit in ostensibly different manners, by Rögglas *wir schlafen nicht* and Rosa’s *La habitación oscura*, Derrida’s ideas in *Specters of Marx* and his concept of ‘hauntology’ offer a good starting point. Hauntology draws partly on other concepts of his like ‘trace’ or *différance* because it refers to the fact that everything that exists is not solely positive or present, but rather its existence is based on a series of absences that give it consistency and intelligibility.⁵² Hauntology also introduces the question of time. As Martin Hägglund explains, Derrida’s aim is “to formulate a general ‘hauntology’ (*hantologie*), in contrast to the traditional ‘ontology’ that thinks being in terms of self-identical presence. What is important about the figure of the spectre, then, is that it cannot be fully present: it has no being in itself but marks a relation to what is *no longer* or *not yet*.”⁵³ Hauntology is the agency of the virtual,⁵⁴ the effectiveness of those ghosts that, without being, *are*. Ghosts are *no longer*, but remain as a virtuality, something that is *not yet* and nevertheless exerts a power in our reality.

Specters of Marx was a resolute engagement with its immediate historical context, marked by the disintegration of the USSR and the alleged end of history that Fukuyama proclaimed. But as Derrida argues, “a ghost never dies, it remains always to come and to come-back.”⁵⁵ Capitalist realism is haunted by those ghosts it cannot fully exorcise, and which sooner or later manifests themselves. They are a virtuality about to materialise. Hauntology is about refusing to give up the ghost or the refusal of the ghost to give up on us.⁵⁶ Ghosts that are no longer and ghosts that are not yet, not giving up the ghosts and ghosts not giving up on us. These two directions of hauntology provide a pertinent framework to analyse Rögglas’s and Rosa’s novels. In *wir schlafen nicht*, ghosts appear as manifestations of workers who are no longer, no longer human, and they bring to light underlying phenomena of exploitative capitalist dynamics, subsumption of personal life under productive criteria, physical exhaustion, and mental impairment. *La habitación oscura*, too, operationalises the dynamics of visibility and invisibility, presence and absence. Its protagonists hide in the dark to laugh and later to cry, to be left alone, thus becoming practically non-existent entities regarding the outside world. The darkness of the room facilitates an outward-looking activism that exposes hidden truths and repressed inequalities and resonates with the optimism of its historical context.

In a time of hegemonic paradigms of capitalist realism, Rögglas *wir schlafen nicht* and Rosa’s *La habitación oscura* may seem naïve exercises of imagination that can now

⁵¹ Wendy Brown, ‘Resisting Left Melancholy’, *boundary 2*, vol. 26 no. 3 (1999), p. 26.

⁵² Cf. Mark Fisher, *Ghosts Of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (Winchester and Washington: zero books, 2014), pp. 25-35.

⁵³ Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), p. 82. Emphasis in original.

⁵⁴ Fisher, *Ghosts*, p. 27.

⁵⁵ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 123.

⁵⁶ Fisher, *Ghosts*, p. 30.

be read with nostalgia or melancholy for past times, as Wendy Brown would say, in which capitalist offensive was perhaps less brutal. But even if these literary works don't offer a clear solution, they show us how the figure of the ghost functions as a critical metaphor through which the ideological surface of capitalist realism can be torn apart. To go back to the etymological roots discussed at the beginning of the essay, ghosts or *phántasma* appear before us and reveal the fractures in our construction of reality. They shed light on that which ought to remain hidden. They are visual manifestations of the physical and affective consequences of the post-Fordist work organization or the outcome of a lack of political engagement with the broader socioeconomical context.

To read these works simply as failed attempts at altering our political system or forms of socioeconomic organization means not only to disregard their critical content, but also to ignore the meaning that Derrida ascribed to hauntology. The ghost, the ghost of lost futures and of different alternatives never dies. Their power resides in their potentiality, in their constant insistence on their existence.⁵⁷ No present can exist without the ghost of a different future haunting it, affecting its reality, and wanting to materialise.

⁵⁷ Cf. Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!* (London and New York: Verso, 2002), p. 22. This idea of potentiality, which Žižek and Derrida link to the figure of ghost, can be traced back to Walter Benjamin. Here, Benjamin conceives past revolutionary attempts as past traces that can be (re)actualised through new revolutions. Even if these revolutionary acts do not actually materialise, the possibility of their actualization confers them a power, an influence over our present, much like the ghost that threatens to appear even if it's not really there, or not yet. Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), pp. 253-264.