María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren, eds,

*The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory*

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For anyone with a research or teaching interest in the spectral and the ghostly, *The Spectralities Reader* is a long-awaited book. It consolidates some of the best and most significant criticism of the so-called “spectral turn” into welcome package, with the editors providing sharp and incisive commentaries. Even for those who have engaged with much of the spectral turn literature, I suspect there will still be enough here to engage and nourish us. The two editors previously edited the useful *Popular Ghosts: The Haunted Spaces of Everyday Culture* (2010) for Continuum and are both significant writers on the spectral on their own, with María del Pilar Blanco with *Ghost-Watching American Modernity: Haunting, Landscape, and the Hemispheric Imagination* (2012) and Esther Peeren with *The Spectral Metaphor: Living Ghosts and the Agency of Invisibility* (2014).

“The spectral turn” is a name coined by Roger Luckhurst (in a 1999 article which is included in this collection) for the concerted interest in supernatural themes, conventionally dated to the release of Jacques Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* in 1993 (English translation in 1994). It is somewhat ironic that one of Derrida’s less-loved books, roundly rejected by Marxists and even inspiring critiques the deconstructionist ranks (Gayatri Spivak’s critique is also included), proved so influential, and writings on spectrality, haunting, ghostliness and the uncanny blossomed in a variety of fields. It is not strictly the case that all of these authors were directly influenced by Derrida, but
rather that he helped put the spectral on the table as a topic in cultural and critical theory. *The Spectralities Reader* works to solidify and clarify a lot of this body of research and has an enviably interdisciplinary scope.

It is divided into six sections, each collecting essays on one of the key areas in which the spectral took root. Part One is entitled “The Spectral Turn” and begins with Derrida’s 1993 interview with Bernard Stieglitz, an often-neglected part of Derrida’s discourse on spectrality. The following essays by Colin Davis, Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, Julian Wolfreys and the aforementioned piece by Roger Luckhurst all expand, reframe and even critique the spectral turn from a variety of perspectives.

Part Two, “Spectropolitics: Ghosts of the Global Contemporary,” discusses the spectre as a globalized figure, or even a figure of globalization itself. It contains piece by Avery Gordon (an excerpt from the invaluable *Ghostly Matters* (1997), Achille Mbembe, Arjun Appadurai and Peter Hitchcock.

Part Three, “The Ghost in the Machine: Spectral Media,” focuses on figuration of the ghost as representing the paradoxical properties of modern media to fix reality and make it eternal, while simultaneously rendering a kind of living death. It contains pieces by Tom Gunning, Jeffery Sconce, Akira Mizuta Lippitt, Allen S. Weiss and Peter Toop. I am particularly pleased to see Gunning’s “To Scan a Ghost: The Ontology of Mediated Vision,” which hopefully will become the standard essay that it should be as a consequence.

Part Four, “Spectral Subjectivities: Gender, Sexuality, Race,” discusses the affinity of the ghost with positions of marginality, and also how “haunting inhabits the process of subjectification itself, from the individual to the national level” (310). It contains the aforementioned Spivak pieces, as well as writings by Carla Freccero, Sharon Patricia Holland and Renée L. Bergland (an excerpt from the excellent *The National Uncanny: Indian Ghosts and American Subjects* (2000)).

It is part Five, “Possessions: Spectral Place,” that contains the strongest links to the editors’ previous collection, *Popular Ghosts: The Haunted Spaces of Everyday Culture* (2010), and works to theorize the importance of locations to the spectral. It contains essays by Anthony Vidler, Ulrich Baer, David Matless and Giorgio Agamben.
This material is particularly intriguing for rethinking the ghost, so often thought of in
terms of temporalities, in terms of spatiality instead.

Finally, Part Six, “Haunted Historiographies,” deals with the importance of
haunting as encapsulating the paradox of history’s simultaneous pastness and persistence.
It has pieces by Judith Richardson, Jesse Alemán and Alexander Nemerov.

One can certainly think of other authors whose work could plausible have been
included here (Marina Warner, John Durham Peters, Gray Kochhar-Lingren, Ashok Kara,
Terry Castle, Barry Curtis, etc.) but are missing, but this work is not designed to be
exhaustive and never could have been. No doubt, any of the sections could have been
expanded to a book length work. The selections that the editors have made here are
unfailingly apt ones, and occasionally quite provocative. Are there strands of the spectral
turn underrepresented here? Possibly the relationship between the spectral and theories of
trauma, both personal and national; certainly this subject comes about in indirect ways
but the scholars who have pursued it most thoroughly (names like Ruth Leys, Barbara
Gabriel, Gabriele Schwab and perhaps Adam Lowenstein come to my mind) are absent.

Any substantial critique of The Spectralities Reader would have to be a critique of
the spectral turn itself, and one of the most trenchant of these came from the editors of
The Victorian Supernatural (2004), who noted that “for Derrida, history is structurally
and necessarily haunted, but where is the supernatural to be found in this kind of
haunting? The problem is that the ghost is only one in a series of deconstructive tropes”
(12). The extensive mining of the ghost for metaphorical value demands the question:
what of quote-unquote “actual” ghosts and the “real” supernatural, which constitutes part
of the belief systems of billions and still remains meaningful for those of us who do not
per se “believe”? The spectral turn also unfolded at the same time as a new wave of
academic interest in spiritualism, occultism and magic from a more historical perspective
– authors like Alex Owen, Pamela Thurschwell, Steven Connors, Richard Noakes, Shane
McCorristine, Srdjan Smajić, and Alison Butler. Perhaps this body of scholarship
principally runs parallel to the spectral turn, but they certainly do at least crisscross, as
evidenced by citations of Derrida in resources like The Ashgate Research Companion to
Nineteenth-Century Spiritualism and the Occult (2012), and Roger Luckhurst is an
example of someone with a presence in both camps. Untangling precisely the relationship
of these scholars on the supernatural to the spectral turn would be a complex task but, I believe, a useful one.

These are merely avenues not taken by the editors, and do not diminish much from my appreciation of this rich project. *The Spectralities Reader* is a valuable collection that showcases the strength and breadth of some of the work of the spectral turn. The language of the philosophical “turn,” like the “wave,” implies temporariness. Perhaps the spectral turn has already crested and this book will serve as a repertory of some of its key works, or perhaps its release will help keep the spectral turn alive. Either way, it shall have a pride of place on my bookshelf.