

## I am ghosts that haunt themselves

**“a ghost never dies, it remains  
always to come and to come back”  
Derrida, J. (1994). Specters of Marx.**

A strange sensation has begun to settle in my chest, a constant tug at my memory, but also a push toward something undefined. Perhaps it's the memory of a moment just past. Perhaps it's the fact that there are more than one, more than one layer, one whisper, one echo — still here but distant, felt but not understood.

In all cultures ghosts haunt places, humans, whole societies.

We can talk of ghosts as shadows cast from times lost, places forgotten. But what if it's not the ghost that haunts us, but rather, we who haunt ourselves? The ghosts we encounter are never the past itself. Instead, they are—in their most concrete form traces and effects— and in their most abstract, what we imagine the past to be, what it means to us now, what we need it to be. In any case, it is the space between past and present, presence and absence where ghosts become almost.

In all cultures ghosts haunt places, humans, whole societies. They lean over from the in-between to haunt the human realm. Rarely we find stories of ghosts haunting each other in their natural habitats. But for humans it seems different. It is our own past that seems to haunt us, our own actions, mistakes, traumata and hopes.

The concept of ghosts has traditionally been framed as the spirits of the dead, lingering in the spaces they once inhabited, unable to move on due to unresolved issues or unfulfilled desires. However, there is a more nuanced interpretation of ghosts that can be deduced from the framework of *Hauntologies*, one that suggests humans themselves are the ghosts that haunt their own lives. These “ghosts” are not external entities, but internal manifestations of the self—shaped by memories, emotions, regrets, and unresolved histories that refuse to fade. Viewed through the lens of both psychological reflection and parapsychology, humans are not only haunted by their pasts, but are also the agents of their own haunting.

In parapsychology (a mid 20th century, vitalist school of thought, propagated amongst other by Hans Driesch and Hans Bender), there is the concept of psychic energy or residual energy, which suggests that intense emotional events leave lasting imprints on the environment, as they do on the human psyche and body. This notion extends to the idea that humans can generate their own forms of hauntings, not necessarily caused by external spirits, but by the emotional and psychological echoes of their own experiences. These echoes can affect the humans environment to such a degree, that they are perceived as “Spuk” (german: spook). In this view, humans are not only haunted by their past, but are also the source of their own hauntings. The emotional energy of unresolved trauma, loss, or unfulfilled desires can linger, shaping both the individual and the world around them.

Additionally, humans are haunted by cultural and social ghosts, products of collective history and societal structures. Past injustices, wars, and environmental changes leave traces not just in the minds of individuals but in the fabric of society itself. These ghosts are

not just individual memories but are collective psychic imprints that continue to influence contemporary behaviors, fears, and anxieties. The collective unconscious is shaped by these imprints, and societies often carry the weight of unresolved histories, much like individuals carry the ghosts of their personal pasts.

This idea of humans as the ghosts that haunt themselves can also be applied to environmental contexts, particularly in the study of secondary succession—the process of ecosystem recovery after a disturbance such as a wildfire. In an ecological sense, humans can be seen as the ghosts that haunt the environment they have altered. As ecosystems recover from human-caused disturbances, the traces of human impact—be it in the form of soil composition, plant species, or altered landscapes—linger. These traces, much like psychic imprints, influence the recovery process, shaping the new ecosystem that arises. In this way, humans are both the agents and the ghosts of environmental change, leaving behind lasting imprints on the land they disturb.

Secondary succession refers to the process of ecological recovery in areas that have been disturbed, such as after a wildfire, flood, or deforestation. It is marked by a gradual re-colonization of species in a landscape that, while altered, still retains remnants of its previous ecological structure. Ghosts, as we've discussed, are the traces of what once was, lingering in forms that are neither fully present nor entirely absent. In this ecological context, they can be understood as the echoes of past systems and species, remnants that influence the future without being directly visible or actively participating in the new system's formation.

To understand better the manifold roles that non-human-ghosts possess in the process of the secondary successions, I propose a threefold categorisation:

1. Ghosts as Traces:

In secondary succession, the “ghosts” of past ecosystems reside in the soil, in the genetic memory of plants, in the remnants of structures like roots or organic matter. They aren't gone entirely, even if the dominant species of the previous ecosystem have disappeared. These “ghosts” influence what can grow next, through seed banks, mycorrhizal networks, and the residual nutrients that remain in the soil. They are not the living organisms of the past, but their influence remains tangible. The system is not a blank slate—it is a canvas haunted by the shadows of what came before.

2. Ghosts as Agents:

The role of ghosts in this process is not passive. Just as memories or past events continue to shape who we are, the remnants of past ecosystems shape the trajectory of secondary succession. This can happen in ways that may be invisible at first but ultimately alter the emerging ecosystem. For example, the invasive species that take hold in disturbed environments can be seen as “ghosts” that warp the succession process, preventing the natural recovery of previous species. They are not part of the ecosystem's new phase, but they influence and change it, like a haunting presence that distorts the natural course of events.

3. Ghosts as the “Stage”:

Another way to consider the ghosts of secondary succession is to view them as the stage upon which the new ecosystem will unfold. Like a theater with the marks of past performances still visible, the area affected by disturbance is ready for new life to enter but also shaped by the residues of its past. These ghosts of the ecosystem—whether it's

charred wood, old animal tracks, or even altered soil chemistry—create the conditions for new life to emerge. In a way, the ghosts hold space for transformation to occur. They are neither a barrier nor an active agent but a framework within which new species can thrive, evolve, and eventually reshape the landscape once more.

This relationship between ghosts and secondary succession emphasizes the ongoing nature of ecological processes. The past doesn't disappear; it lingers in new forms, influencing the future in subtle but significant ways. The process of ecological recovery after a disturbance is not a clean slate, but rather a dialogue between what was and what is to come, mediated by the "ghosts" of past systems and species. In this sense, secondary succession is an ongoing act of negotiation between the living, the dead, and the yet-to-come.

The question persists: Why are we haunted? Not just by the spirits of the dead, but by the empty spaces of our existence, the traces of our actions, the voids left in the wake of what we have done. Ghosts, are active forces, not passive shadows. They move within systems, beneath the skin of culture. The systems we create haunt us—they follow us, untraceable yet ever-present, woven into our landscapes, our routines, our rhythms.

The world we've shaped is now haunted by its own invisible ghosts. The rhythms of nature, once in harmony with human life, have become disruptive forces, twisting and reshaping our sense of time, making it difficult to feel grounded. It's a strange haunting: a future that has already arrived, shaping us without us even knowing it. Ghosts are forces: unacknowledged but always there, pressing against us, pulling at us. We aren't haunted by the past, we are haunted by what we have done, by what we have become.

Is the fact that we are haunted by our own ghosts a punishment? A warning? A lesson? These are questions that suggest a moral framework, one that attempts to position the haunting within a narrative of cause and effect, of retribution or enlightenment. But can this haunting really be confined to human-centric categories?

If we view the ghost as punishment, we must first ask: what is the crime? Is it the abuse of the environment through unsustainable practices, the destruction of ecosystems, or the neglect of the planet's inherent limits? Perhaps the crime lies in how we have treated each other—through exploitation, marginalization, and violence. Or maybe it is more subtle: the crime could be a failure to confront our own complicity in systems of inequality, or the erosion of empathy and understanding in our relationships with other humans.

At its core, the haunting can be seen as the natural consequence of an unexamined life, where the consequences of past actions—whether on the environment, other beings, or ourselves—return as ghosts that demand attention. These ghosts are not abstract; they are real forces that manifest in the ecological breakdowns, social inequalities, and personal disconnections we face. If we treat this haunting as a warning, it is an urgent call to stop repeating past mistakes, to confront the ghosts of our environmental neglect, colonial histories, and cultural amnesia.

Yet, the haunting might also be a lesson, albeit one that comes at a high cost. It speaks of interconnectedness and responsibility, urging us to reflect on the way we engage with the world around us, with each other, and with our shared histories. The ghosts we face are the consequences of the unheeded warnings, the environmental collapse, and the societal breakdowns we have long overlooked. They remind us that there is no escaping the past, no dismissing its effects, and no returning to an untouched, pristine state. To learn from these ghosts is to come to terms with our own role in the unfolding of these histories, and to change the way we approach the future—one where humans are not masters of a world to

be exploited, but stewards of a fragile, interconnected system that requires care and respect.

*Humans are the ghosts that haunt themselves* as echoes of their own past actions, unresolved traumas, and the unexamined residues of cultural and environmental impacts. Just as secondary succession in ecosystems is shaped by the remnants of past disturbances, humans too are shaped by the psychic and material traces of their history. The ghosts we encounter are not external forces but internal ones—manifestations of our memories, regrets, and the collective consequences of our choices. These ghosts are not passive; they haunt, influence, and direct our present and future realities, much like the imprints of past ecosystems that continue to influence ecological recovery. We are both the agents and the recipients of this haunting, moving through time and space, forever shaped by the invisible forces we have set in motion. The past, in its many forms—whether individual or collective—does not simply fade into history. Instead, it lingers, constantly haunting our understanding of the present.