In the Company of Ghosts

Hauntology, Ethics, Digital Monsters

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Til mine forældre, Hanne og Claus Henriksen.

Til min søster, Louise.

Og til Konrad.

Nervously, I called out.

"Hello?"

There was a brief moment of breathless tension as we lay static in the water. This silence was suddenly broken by laughter.

"*Hello?*" Josh cackled.

"So what?"

"Hello, Mr. Monster-in-the-woods. I know you're sneaking around but maybe you'll answer to my 'hello'?
Helloooooooo!"

I realized how stupid it was. Whatever animal it was, it wouldn't respond. I hadn't even realized I'd said it until afterwards, but if anything was actually there I obviously wouldn't get a reply.

Josh continued,

"Helloooooo," in a high falsetto.

"Helloooo," I countered with as deep a baritone as I could manage

"'Ello there, mate!"

"Hel-lo. Beep boop."

"HhheeeEEELLLLLOOOooooo."

We continued mocking each other, and were in the process of turning the raft around to head back when we heard:

"Hello"

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

FOREWORD

Hello! Is there anybody there?

"Is there anybody there?" the medium, Madame Irena, asks.[1] Her fingers are lightly touching the planchette, awaiting reply. "Is there a presence?" Her sitter, Miss Walter-David, watches her intensely. She has lost her fiancé, Frank, to influenza in 1919 and seeks contact from beyond the veil. The year is 1923. "Is there a traveller from afar?" Madame Irena asks.

Many years later and someplace else, two boys lie on a home-made raft, mockingly shouting *hello* into the dark woods, certain that they will get no reply. After all, nothing that lives in the woods would be capable of a human response, such as hello.

"I'd like to ask you something," Pascale says. It is 1983, and she is sitting across from the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. "Do you believe in ghosts?"

All, except for the young boys, wait in silence for a response. The medium's parlour goes a little darker and a little colder, like the water surrounding the children's raft. It is almost winter, and they should not be out this late at all, paddling through the icy streams, but they wanted to finish

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[1] The texts quoted in the foreword are: *Ghost Dance* 1983; Newman 2011; 1000Vultures 2011.

the map they are making of the river and the forest. They are explorers, they tell each other. Travellers from afar.

The tassels on the heavy drapes in the medium's parlour stir like deep-sea plants. There is a clamminess to the room that is almost fog-like, resembling the invisible twirls of smoke from the philosopher's pipe.

The planchette twitches. Miss Walter-David jumps as she feels the movement underneath her fingertips. If Pascale had posed her question to Miss Walter-David instead of Derrida, the answer would now have been a "yes". Madame Irena senses the dawning belief of the sitter like the tug of a fishing line. The hook has gone in.

"Is there anybody there?" the medium repeats.

Y

"That's a difficult question," Derrida replies.

From the forest, the boys hear a "hello".

Madame Irena stares at the Ouija board, where the planchette points at the letter Y. Why did the spirit not just point to YES? On the raft, the boys realize that the greeting came from a place they have not yet mapped out. Holding a Roman candle, one of the boys sends glowing red lights into the star-strewn sky and then tosses it into the freezing cold water, where it is immediately extinguished.

Nothing. They can still see *nothing*.

"Firstly, you're asking a ghost whether he believes in ghosts," Derrida continues. "Here, the ghost is me. Since I've been asked to play myself in a film that is more or less improvised, I feel as if I'm letting a ghost speak for me." The phone rings. "Now the telephone is the ghost …"

"… hello?"

Something is following the boys from within the forest. They can hear the rustling and the snapping of branches. The raft is coming apart, and water is seeping in.

"Have you a message for anyone here?" Madame asks.

Y

"For whom?"

U

"Well, that was the phantom voice of someone I don't know," Derrida says, hanging up the phone. "He could have told me any old story. Someone who's arrived from the USA and says he knows a friend of mine."

The boys are in the water now, desperately trying to get back on land, but there is something *there*, in the woods, following them.

U R ALLONE

U R ALONE

Madame Irena knows a typewriting mistake when she sees one. This spirit is not deceased. Oh no. This spirit is something very different all together. What she has caught on her fishing hook in this cold, damp room is not just Miss Walter-David's scepticism; it is a self-proclaimed web shark, surfing the internet in 2001.

"I believe that ghosts are part of the future and that the modern technology of images like cinematography and telecommunication enhances the power of ghosts and their ability to haunt us," Derrida says.

The boys are safely back on land. The monster has gone, but so has their map. The terrain belonging to the creature in the woods – the creature that speaks from the borders of the known world – has been widened.

"Is there anybody there?"

When the map returns, it has been altered.

"Is there anybody there?"

A new figure has been drawn on the paper, holding a little boy's hand.

"Is there anybody there?"

Y DAMMIT Y

"And you," Derrida asks. "Do you believe in ghosts?"

INTRODUCTION
From the Belly of the Monster

1.

What this text *is*.

"There is nothing outside of the text," French philosopher Jacques Derrida says (quoted in Kirby 2014: 53), which makes the task of writing forewords and introductions a difficult one indeed. After all, it is the job of such sections of text to step outside the main text and explain "what the book 'that you are about to read' *is*, textually speaking", as literary scholar David Appelbaum puts it (2009: ix. Emphasis added). Yet, in doing so, introductions are always doomed to fail in the sense of 'wandering' and 'going astray',[2] to lose their way and therefore end up back inside again, for it is impossible for them to not be part of that which they attempt to write about at a distance. With this introduction, I will set out some signposts as to *what this text that you are about to read is about*, what context it is written from, and what it aims to do. This will inevitably lead me to Chapter One: Tempting the Ghosts Out, which will be on the subject of writing as failure, exploration and enquiry. In this sense, the introduction is a view from afar, an itinerary that will later be corrected,[3] whereas Chapter One will zoom in and introduce the more explorative writing-style that will make up the remainder of the text. And so:

This text that you are about to read is a discussion of what it might mean to think and imagine an ethics of responsibility towards that which does not exist

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[2] I am here referring to how 'failure' is etymologically related to 'err', meaning "go astray, lose one's way … wander …" See Online Etymology Dictionary: fail (v.) and err (v.). Links: http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=fail&allowed_in_frame=0 and http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=err Last accessed: April 2016.

[3] I discuss the question of 'corrections' and how they may work as conjurations in the concluding chapter, Chapter Five: A Trick, as well as in Corrections.

according to traditional western ontology. As such, the text is first of all an engagement with Derrida's 'hauntology', which is a term he coined in the book *Spectres of Marx*, published in French in 1993 and English in 1994. The word *hauntology* brings together *ontology* and *haunting*, suggesting that all that can be said to exist does so due to a series of haunting, excluded others. Apart from engaging with ontology, Derrida therefore also argues for a relational ethics that takes seriously the agency of such absent others, suggesting that ethics does not merely concern that which can be said to be *present* and *immediate*, but also *absent presences*, such as those who are yet to be born, those who are no longer and those who may never be. This is therefore an ethics that reaches beyond the immediate, beyond the present and beyond the moment, and it takes as its guide the figure of the ghost; a creature that, through its hauntings, is both present and absent. A hauntological ethics can, however, be a difficult one to imagine, for how does one engage with that which is an absent presence without merely making it fully present?

According to Derrida, tele-technologies are a good place to explore the disturbances in time and space offered by the ghost and other absent presences. Derrida himself primarily engaged with TV, film and the telephone when discussing hauntology and technology since, as hauntologist Mark Fisher puts it, he did not "live to see the full effects – no doubt I should say the full effects so far – of the 'tele-technology' that has most radically contracted time and space, the Internet …" (2012: 19). Fisher himself engages with hauntology in the context of the internet,[4] yet primarily through the lens of digital music. In this text, I shall move hauntology and the digital in a different and so far unexplored direction by taking as my guides some of the monsters, ghosts and ghouls that have been created by

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[4] The internet – broadly speaking – is the collection of networks that connect computers. The world wide web, on the other hand, is an addition that makes it possible to navigate the internet and retrieve information. Most users, however, do not distinguish between the two. Since this is not a media studies text, but written from the position of an everyday-user of digital technologies, I have taken the liberty to use the words interchangeably throughout this text as well. For more on my position as researcher, see Chapter One: Tempting the Ghosts Out.

internet story-telling in recent years. I argue that such guides may help one to think and imagine both the world and ethics differently by exploring the agency of the virtual and the creatures that trouble traditional understandings of what can be said to exist and what cannot. In other words, by following these guides I will map out a hauntological ethics using primarily playful and performative writing to do so. As noted, I will go into more detail with this writing-style in Chapter One, but first: why is a hauntological ethics necessary? Why think with and through monsters and ghosts? And why now?

2.
A spectre is haunting Europe

During the last months of writing this text, I kept listening to the song 'Skt. Petri Torv' by the Danish band Magtens Korridorer. Loosely translated (ruining the rhymes), the chorus goes:

> Perhaps you think it's all a joke
> But Fenrir[5] is on the prowl.
> You think that it'll all turn out alright
> While the entire world is burning.[6]
> (Magtens Korridorer: Skt. Petri Torv [2007])

The world is always burning, but these days the wealthy north, including my own country, Denmark, seems to be experiencing flames closer to home than we are

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[5] Fenrir (or *Fenrisulven* in Danish), is a giant wolf from Norse mythology and the son of the giants Angerboda and Loke. He grew so big that the gods began to fear him and tied him up with the unbreakable rope, Gleipner. According to legend, Fenrir will break free of Gleipner during Ragnarok, that is, the end of days.
[6] Translated from the original Danish by me. Original text: "Du tror måske, det er for sjov – men Fenrisulven er på rov. Du tænker, at det nok skal gå – imens hele verden brænder på" (Magtens Korridorer 2007).

used to, not least in the form of what politicians and media have called 'the biggest refugee crisis since World War II'. Syrian and other refugees are risking their lives to reach the shores of Europe, while most of these shores are hastening to put up all possible barriers - materially, politically and ideologically. In the case of Denmark, refugees have quickly become scapegoats concerning issues that the country – like many other countries – has been struggling with prior to their arrival. Among these, the financial hardships experienced in the wake of the economic crisis, which has meant that many people are without a job and that the public sector has suffered severe cuts.

This text is not engaging directly with the so-called refugee crisis, the aftermath of the financial crisis, or any other socio-political crisis. It is, however, not written in a vacuum, but instead from within what the feminist theorist and story-teller Donna Haraway calls 'the belly of the monster' (Haraway 1992). 'The belly of the monster' is Haraway's metaphor for the context of a given work, and how it forms the writer and the writing.[7] Here, the 'monster' is a Fenrir-like beast that is supposedly busy swallowing the world as the spectres of for example World War II and the financial crisis of the 30s are unleashed on the western world, seemingly foretelling the coming of Ragnarok. "A specter is haunting Europe … the specter of communism," Marx wrote in 1848 (quoted in Derrida 2011: 123). The spectres haunting Europe now seem to be those of the end of days: of old wars and the failures of capitalism.

According to Marx, there is only one thing one can do with spectres and that is to conjure them away: either by making them materialise – which was his

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[7] It is worth mentioning that Haraway is referring to a pregnant monster, that is, a monster that is slowly gestating the writing and the writer, whereas the monster I am referring to here – Fenrir – *digests* the writing and the writer. Both are processes of transformation, and as I discuss in Chapter Four: The Smile, eating and digestion may be violent acts, but they also pose important questions of ethical relationality and responsibility – as well as companionship as *cum panis*, meaning 'with bread' (Haraway 2008).
Whereas this introduction offers a somewhat distanced engagement with the context within which this text is written – that is, the socio-political and academic background - I will be zooming in on my own role as researcher in Chapter One: Tempting the Ghosts Out. This, too, is an important aspect of the 'belly of the monster'.

hope for communism – or by making them dissolve completely. The same, I argue, seems to be at stake with the current hauntings of Europe; the ghosts of past crises and hardship must be conjured away through 'no-nonsense' politics as well as what feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti has called an "undue allegiance to 'common sense' … and to economic profit – the banality of self-interest" (Braidotti 2013: 4). In other words, in times of crisis, there is little space for risk-taking, for vulnerability and for openness towards the unknown. This can be a hinder for creative and imaginative thought, creating what Braidotti calls 'imaginative poverty' (2008: 6) as the lived experiences of present day subjects clash with an outdated social imaginary that can no longer represent and express what it means to be a subject in this day and age.

In times of crises, there is also little space for ghosts – these creatures of nonsense, the immaterial and that which is "commonly considered not to matter" (del Pilar Blanco and Pereen 2013: 9). Yet, whether ghosts are welcome or not, they – like other monsters - linger. They appear in films; in art; music; as everyday metaphors for nonsense and the non-existent, and they appear in scholarly work. "Our contemporary moment is a haunted one," literary scholar Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock writes (2013: 61). He argues that "the current fascination with ghosts arises out of a general postmodern suspicion of meta-narratives accentuated by millennial anxiety" (2013: 63) and that "[m]illennial specters ask us to what extent we can move forward into a new millennium when we are still shackled to a past that haunts us and that we have yet to face" (2013: 64). Weinstock writes from within an American context, but as mentioned above, Europe is haunted by spectres of the past as well. These spectres throw the looming shadows of past misery across the millennial threshold, making it difficult to pass into the promised future of a new and improved millennium. *no chance of passing*, as one of the ghosts of this text will later say.

Mark Fisher, writing from within a British context, argues that these lingering ghosts are the creatures of a 21st-century culture marked by anachronism and inertia and that "this stasis has been buried, interred behind a superficial frenzy

of 'newness', of perpetual movement" (2014: 6). He continues his argument by bringing in the question of music, saying:

> While 20th-century experimental culture was seized by a recombinatorial delirium, which made it feel as if newness was infinitely available, the 21st century is oppressed by a crushing sense of finitude and exhaustion. It doesn't feel like the future. Or, alternatively, it doesn't feel as if the 21st century has started yet. (Fisher 2014: 8)

The music of the 21st century thus becomes the soundtrack of what he refers to as 'the slow cancellation of the future' (Fisher 2014: 2), as the future that was promised never arrived. Braidotti seems to agree with Fisher that these are aporetic times of both 'stasis' and 'perpetual movement', arguing that at "such a time more conceptual creativity is necessary; a theoretical effort is needed in order to bring about the conceptual leap across inertia, nostalgia, and aporia" (Braidotti 2008: 3).

Weinstock, Fisher and Braidotti are examples of theorists working within the areas of 'Monster Studies' and 'spectralities'. Both these areas of study engage with the need for more theoretical creativity and imagination by taking as their objects of research the figures of the 'nonsensical', that is, ghosts and monsters. Both areas have their roots in the 1990s, when not least Derrida's *Spectres of Marx* rekindled an interest in creatures that are typically understood to be figures of 'nonsense' and 'lack of common sense' – the very last things that are encouraged in times of crisis. Before going into more detail with spectralities and Monster Studies, as well as the critical and creative theoretical frameworks they offer, I will therefore give a short introduction to hauntology as well as its connections to tele-technology.

3.

In the company of ghosts

Hauntology is a critical, imaginative and playful place to begin thinking differently about ethics and ontology – something which is desperately needed in times of crisis and the shutting down of risky, 'unproductive' and 'nonsensical' thought. As noted above, hauntology is a pun that brings together the words 'ontology' and 'haunting'. As such, it thinks ontology – "the philosophical study of what can be said to exist", as Fisher puts it (2014: 17) – through the figure of the ghost and the absent presence of haunting. It does so, however, without demanding that the ghost shows itself, nor that it disperses. The ethical challenge of hauntology, Derrida argues, is therefore to stay "*with* ghosts, in the upkeep, the conversation, the company, or the companionship, in the commerce without commerce of ghosts. To live otherwise, and better. No, not better, but more justly. But *with them*" (Derrida 2011: xviii. Emphasis in original). Note that Derrida makes a small correction here: 'To live otherwise, and better. No, not better, but more justly'. Living *better* is a question of morality based on values of what is right and wrong. Within such an ethics, there is a better world to be gained, if only everybody follow the moral codex dictated by a universal understanding of what is right and what is wrong. According to Derrida, however, such a universal ethics is not possible; there is nothing that is universally good for everybody, nor universally bad. Instead, as I will return to later in this introduction, hauntology is relational, suggesting that there is no one static world out there to be discovered and fully understood. As such, the spectre of the 'good world' is impossible, but – in the spirit(s) of companionship – Derrida does not ask that it either disperses or materialises. The correction – *no, not better* - allows the 'better world' to remain, even as it is corrected,[8] leaving it side by side with the idea of *justice*. For justice is no less impossible; it is the yearning for the perfectly just world, the impossible world that is good for all. In this yearning for

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[8] For more on the significance of 'corrections', see Chapter Five: A Trick, as well as Corrections.

the impossible, there is the possibility of *something* happening. As feminist theorist Karen Barad writes: "Don't for a minute think that there are no material effects of yearning and imagining" (2012: 13). The ethical task is to stay *with* the uncertainty of not knowing what this *something* is prior to its arrival. Only in this not-knowing can the truly different and other take place.

Since a just world is still to come – and will never be, since it is impossible – justice opens up towards that which lies beyond the moment, in the realms of the non-existent, the yet to come, the past, and that which one yearns and longs for. This is what makes the ghost an interesting figure to take as a guide through im/possible terrains in the making; the figure of the haunting ghost shows how the past, the present and the future can never be neatly separated from one another, nor can that which enjoys a disturbing absent presence be done away with. It will always return, as Derrida's figure of the *revenant* – the ghost as something that 'walks again' – hints at. The *revenant* refers both to the ghost in traditional folklore, but also to a more general, returning force, for example the iterability of language that, paradoxically, is what allows the speaking subject to regard itself as singular and unique; it is by letting ghosts speak through it[9] – in the shape of returning words spoken by others before it – that the subject can address the world as if it was separate from it, alone and unhaunted. But all text is haunted by these returns, Derrida argues – even text that claims to be on the outside, at a distance, describing itself, such as for example the anxiety-inducing meta-narratives mentioned by Weinstock. Or an introduction.

Turning towards the ghost as a figure of undecidability is at the core of justice. It also points to how an ethics of justice towards the ghost is an ethics of risk (Shildrick 2002), since staying open to the arrival of the unknown is not without its dangers. Yet, risk is necessary in order to engage with the possibilities for change. As Derrida writes, speaking of Marx's ghostbusting: "As soon as one calls for the disappearance of ghosts, one deprives oneself of the very thing that constitutes the

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[9] I will discuss such 'possessions' in more detail in Chapter Four: The Smile, Chapter Five: A Trick, as well as in Corrections.

revolutionary movement itself, that is to say, the appeal to justice" (Derrida 2013: 46). The ghost brings with it the revolution, and the revolution may not necessarily bring about something universally *better – what good could come of this?* a ghost will later ask. *What good, children, could come of any of this?* - but it will bring difference and movement, disturbing the status quo.

Writing from within the belly of the monster of Ragnarok, a risky ethics of justice that is an opening up towards the unknown, the undecidable and unpredictable seems a sort of heresy. This, I argue, is exactly why it is needed: as border-fences are raised and (national) identities increasingly set in stone, perhaps now is the time to think beyond the moment, responding to the hauntings of the spectres of the past and the im/possible futures they hint at. Perhaps now is the time for a risky revolution that is not about growth and productivity, nor necessarily answers and no-nonsense, but about questions and an opening up to imagination, even nonsense, as it is in imagination and nonsense that unpredictable, surprising and different terrains may take form. Indeed, in recent years, various scholars[10] - such as for example Braidotti, Fisher and Weinstock - have argued for just that, as they have taken monsters and ghosts as their objects of research within 'spectralities' and 'Monster Studies'. Yet, how does one engage with that which is unpredictable, undecidable, somewhat nonsensical and an im/possible absent presence without ordering it to either materialise or go away?

As previously mentioned, Derrida argues that tele-technologies may be the best place to encounter ghosts. "I believe that ghosts are part of the future and that the modern technology of images, like cinematography and telecommunication, enhances the power of ghosts and their ability to haunt us," Derrida playing the role of Derrida in the experimental film *Ghost Dance* says,

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[10] Notable examples are: Jodey Castricano (*Cryptomimesis: The Gothic and Jacques Derrida's Ghost Writing*, 2001); Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (*Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, 1996); Mark Fisher (*Ghosts of my Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures,* 2014); Avery Gordon (*Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, 2008 [1997]) Asa Mittman (*The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous,* 2013 [2012]); Margrit Shildrick (*Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self*, 2002).

continuing: "In fact, it's because I wished to tempt the ghosts out that I agreed to appear in a film".[11] To Derrida, ghosts and tele-technologies are inherently intertwined. This is something he repeats in *Spectres of Marx*, where this intertwinement is part of the reason why a hauntology is necessary at all: "the medium of the media … this element itself is neither living nor dead, present nor absent: it spectralizes", he explains. "It does not belong to ontology, to the discourse on the Being of beings, or to the essence of life or death. It requires, then, what we call … *hauntology*" (Derrida 2011: 63. Emphasis in original). Tele-technologies then offer a way to engage with spectres and the spectral without necessarily asking that the ghost materialises or disperses. They also provide homes for some strange creatures indeed.

4.

"Spread the word". The absent presences of digital technology.

According to internet legend, a cursed JPEG image-file has been circulating online since the early 1990s – about the time when Derrida wrote *Spectres of Marx*. It is called Smile.jpg and shows the image of a dog with glowing eyes and a broad, almost human grin. From the darkness behind it, a hand reaches out as if to pull the viewer in. The legend goes that anyone who sees this image will experience a sudden onset of "temporal lobe epilepsy and acute anxiety"[12] and later have their dreams haunted by the demon dog, Smile.dog. 'Spread the word,' it tells its victims, willing them to show its image to someone else, thereby passing on the curse. Then – and only then – will it leave them alone. So it promises.

The story of Smile.jpg is a so-called 'creepypasta', that is, a short text, sometimes accompanied by an image or a video that is intended to be copied, pasted and circulated online. Indeed, 'creepypasta' derives from 'copypasta', which

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[11] *Ghost Dance* 1983. 20:13 – 20:34.
[12] *The Curious Case of Smile.jpg*, ca. 2008.

is a nickname for text that has been copied and pasted. Copypasta, however, can concern any subject, whereas creepypasta is more specific, often intending to unnerve the reader and/or viewer, and typically engaging with the horror genre or the paranormal. Some creepypastas – like the story of Smile.jpg – even come with a curse.

The Smile.jpg creepypasta – called *The Curious Case of Smile.jpg* (ca. 2008) – is one of the stories I will be engaging with in this text. Others are the podcast *Welcome to Night Vale* (2012 – present); the web-series *Mushroom Land TV/Smile Guide* (2013 – present); a viral story about a young man, Nathan, whose dead girlfriend, Emily, contacts him via Facebook (*My dead girlfriend keeps messaging me on facebook*, 2014); and the creepypasta-picture usually just known as *Smile* (2007).[13] In-between these main stories, I will be referring to other sources and stories as well, such as discussions on message-boards, online articles and news. I will also be referring to traditional novels and short-stories, in order to point to how online stories are not contained on the web, but are indebted to other kinds of writing as well – and vice versa.

What the main stories have in common is an engagement with the interconnections between the paranormal, digital technologies and a sense of undecidability, even anxiety. In these stories, the knowledge offered by various tele-technologies – the character of Mr. L. in *The Curious Case* patiently explains to the readers what the Smile.dog mystery is all about, using the web to do so; Cecil the radio-host from *Welcome to Night Vale* provides an overview of all that goes on in the small town of Night Vale; Agatka, the TV-host from *Mushroom Land TV*, explains to her viewers how to carry out specific tasks; Nathan turns to online message-boards in order to solve a mystery, and the same is the case with readers getting hold of the *Smile*-picture – is underpinned by what I, with a term borrowed from feminist philosopher Margrit Shildrick, call a 'space of not-knowingness' (Shildrick 2009: 160). As such: Mr. L.'s search for knowledge is made possible by the

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[13] For a more detailed introduction to these stories, see Here be Monsters: About the Stories.

use of digital technologies, whose contagious nature he eventually has to admit that he cannot fully know nor control; Cecil's reporting often only helps to draw his listeners' as well as his own attention to events no one can fully understand, only report; Agatka's online tutorials are surreal and impossible to understand, such as when she explains how to 'effectively apple'; Nathan, like Mr. L., never finds an answer to the mystery he wishes to solve, until he becomes the mystery himself, and *Smile* offers no answers, only the risk of a curse every time one looks at it. In other words; digital technologies seem to bring forth information and knowledge, but only through the workings of something unseen and undecidable, which means that full knowledge is yet again deferred.

5.

Hidden depths.

In her doctoral thesis on the internet and digital systems, media theorist Sandra Robinson discusses how digital media function due to advanced systems hidden below the interface, creating what I will call a disturbing absent presence.[14] "Communication and information technology and networks feel present … yet are unseen," Robinson writes. "[W]e sense them through our devices such as the cell phone, that mediate our network experience alongside software applications such as Facebook or Google" (2014: 1). She continues, explaining how these systems are increasingly moulded on the workings of non-human lifeforms,[15] such as bacteria, giving them a sense of agency that is at times difficult to predict. "Human clients on the network cannot see the submerged, agential, autonomous capacity for control, but we feel its effect," she says (2014: 221).

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[14] I am grateful to Myra Hird, who suggested Robinson's work to me.
[15] This text does in many ways engage indirectly with the area of (feminist) posthumanism, not least due to the critique of traditional humanist morality and the humanist subject of knowledge, but also due to the figure of the non-human, which will keep returning throughout the text. Whereas the text can be understood to fit within that particular area of study, it is not, however, an area that I will be engaging with directly.

Robinson does not engage with the work of Derrida, yet her description of digital media as a presence and an effect caused by systems that are experienced as somewhat absent fits well within a hauntological understanding of these technologies. I find it interesting that systems that are intended to bring about immediate, vast knowledge are to such a large extent made possible through such complexities that it is impossible for the average user to fully understand it. Here, absence is indeed what makes presence possible, and it is the space of not-knowingness that connects, but never fully explains. The spaces that are opened and offered by digital technologies are, I argue, spectral, as well as somewhat paradoxical. These are spaces where one may explore and experiment with spectral responses from the deep and the invisible voids just below one's fingertips – but at the risk of anxiety.

According to psychoanalyst Roberto Harari's readings of the works of Jacques Lacan, anxiety is the signal that a void – that is, boundless emptiness and nothingness – is too close for comfort.[16] When such anxiety is experienced, the subject will often find it difficult to move, since the overflowing nature of the void threatens to undo the subject's sense of an imagined bodily unity that can move as a single organism. Instead, the subject is fragmented, suspended in aporia. I argue that the aporia and anxiety that one may experience in the encounter with the space of not-knowingness of digital technologies serve as a magnifying lens for a more general anxiety concerning the boundaries between self and other, as well as the 'millennial anxiety' discussed by Weinstock and the inertia and aporia discussed by Fisher and Braidotti. This is the aporetic anxiety that halts the subject and makes it impossible to cross the boundary into the future, which would be ghost-free – or so it is promised, and so a theorist such as Braidotti would hope. Indeed, whereas Braidotti sees a lot of critical potential in the figure of the monster – a point I will return to - she is highly critical of spectrality and the figure of the ghost. In order to 'leap across aporia', as she wrote in the previous quote, she argues that one must

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[16] I am grateful to Donna McCormack for reminding me of the role of the void in Lacan's theories on anxiety. I will discuss anxiety and aporia in more detail in Chapter Three: The Void.

leave behind the spectre. Before going on to explaining why I do think that there is critical potential in the spectre, I would, however, like to stay a little longer with Braidotti's critique of spectrality, since it touches upon some of the issues that may arise when connecting technology and hauntology.

6.

Ghostly and ghastly circulations. A critique of hauntology.

Braidotti points to what she sees as a "spectral economy of the ghostly presence-absence of fulfilment …" (2008: 188), which feeds into a 'techno-teratological imaginary' (2008: 211) that encompasses the new roles of teletechnologies and communication technologies. "This has … to do with the economy of the spectral, that is to say the forever living-dead of the media representation system: images live on forever, specially in the age of their digital manipulation," she explains. "They circulate in a continuous present in a ghastly/ghostly economy of vampiric consumption. This postmodern Gothic element is consequently overwhelming in today's highly mediamatic societies" (2008: 211). In such repetitive circulations, she argues, more creativity and imagination is needed, which cannot be found in "the 'hauntology' of missing presence" with its "tyranny of a signifier that forever refers to something else, which is never 'there' and never 'that' anyway" (2008: 185).

Braidotti is inspired by the work of French poststructuralist theorists Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and not least their critique of Lacanian understandings of desire as based on lack. As such, Braidotti argues for a Deleuze and Guattarian understanding of desire as productive, and the world in general as something that is in *becoming* rather than *being*. This may be why Braidotti is not interested in staying with the ghosts of aporia – which might be imagined as an encounter with the void and nothingness of Lacanian anxiety – but instead wants a more material and corporeal imaginary of the subject and its world(s). She concludes that "a culture that is in the grip of a techno-teratological imaginary at a time of deep social

and historical change is a culture that badly needs *less* abstraction and less hype" (2008: 211. Emphasis in original).

Whereas I agree with Braidotti that a more imaginative and creative theoretical effort is needed in order to think for example ethics differently, I disagree that this effort needs to move away from the ghost and 'across' aporia. Instead, I argue for staying *with* the ghosts, in their company, as Derrida puts it. Such ghosts include the spectral Smile.dog that asks you to pass its curse around through the means of copying and pasting, which moves it to the core of Braidotti's 'ghostly/ghastly circulations' of digital media. My argument is not that the ghost – or the figure of a demon dog - is an unproblematic character, but rather that its connections to aporia, anxiety and returns may be what make it a useful guide when working through imaginative poverty rather than attempting to 'leap across aporia', as Braidotti suggests. Indeed, I will argue also that there is no 'across' or 'around', only *with* and *through* when it comes to how to think and imagine the world differently.

Before going into more detail regarding the question of staying *with* ghosts, I would, however, like to give an introduction to the area of 'ghost studies', or, more accurately: 'spectralities'. This, along with the field of 'Monster Studies', is a theoretical framework I will be drawing upon throughout this text. They are also both areas of research that I hope to contribute to and develop.

7.

(Re)turn and *re*volution. Spectralities.

"We live in a time of monsters" (1996: vii) monster studies scholar Jeffrey Jerome Cohen writes in the 1996 foreword to his anthology *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*. Even though all times have their monsters, the 1990s did indeed seem to experience a resurgence of interest in strange creatures, also within academia. The same is the case with the ghost, and the 1990s came to be known as the decade of

the so-called 'spectral turn', that is, a (re)discovery of the metaphorical and conceptual potentials of spectrality and haunting. This 'turn' was partially initiated by Derrida when he published *Spectres of Marx* in the early 90s, coining the term 'hauntology'.

In *The Spectralities Reader* (2013), however, editors Maria del Pilar Blanco and Esther Pereen critique the metaphor of the 'turn', as it suggests a reaction to and a turning away from something else: "Real turns follow on each other and are therefore conceptualized as reactions or ordered in terms of cause and effect; they cannot be thought in concert with each other", they write (del Pilar and Pereen 2013: 31). The figure of the ghost is not one that lends itself to straight-forward causality. On the contrary, haunting is about the disruption of linear time and space, as past, present and future blend together in the establishing of a haunted house or indeed a haunted subject. As such, the ghost, del Pilar Blanco and Pereen argue, never merely turns: it *re*turns, which

> could inaugurate an alternative logic of the turn as something not necessarily definitive or revolutionary in the sense of radically new. Instead of demanding a distancing, the twists and turns of haunting manifest as a layering, a palimpsestic thinking together, simultaneously, rather than a thinking against or after … The spectral turn, then, may be read not only as a turn *to* the spectral, but also as the spectralization *of* the turn – its unmooring from defined points of departure, notions of linear progress, and fixed destinations.
> (del Pilar Blanco and Pereen 2013: 32. Emphasis in original)

The spectralization of the turn means that any present understanding of ghosts is indebted to past imaginaries of the spectral as well. During the late 19th century, for example, the ghost of most western countries had a figurative side to it, del Pilar Blanco and Pereen explain, but it was also considered an object of study in itself, a riddle to solve like any other of nature's mysteries. After all, ghosts were inhabitants of societies that were discovering particles and microbes, while developing intangible technologies, such as telegraphy and cinema; the spectral

was par for the course and yet another aspect of the world to be explored and understood. To some extent, this is still a good description of the current monster-belly from within which I write, as these are times fascinated by the indeterminacies of quantum physics as well as surrounded by intangible technologies and their wireless connections. As I discuss in Chapter Three: The Void, the understanding of spectral worlds as spaces to conquer and explore is also still alive and well.

During the 20th century, the ghost changed from being a literal figure to a more abstract one, and its associations with superstition made the subject of the ghostly "somewhat toxic for scholars seeking to be taken seriously" (del Pilar Blanco and Pereen 2013: 3). As the ghost transformed almost fully from a literal to a metaphorical figure, it lost its place within 'reality' and therefore also its place within traditional western ontology and academic work. This, of course, does not mean that no western thinkers have been engaging with the subject of the ghost at all. On the contrary, Derrida's own writings have been significantly inspired by not least Marx – who wrote extensively on ghosts – and the psychoanalysts Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok.

To Marx, Abraham and Torok the ghost remained an issue to be solved and thereby exorcised. As previously mentioned, Marx wanted the ghost to either materialise or disappear, there could be no in-between. To Abraham and Torok – who wrote together on the subject, for example in *The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonymy* from 1976 – the ghost presents a secret within the subject. This secret must be wrestled from the ghost in order for the patient to get better, yet the ghost will fight this healing process. To Abraham and Torok, the ghost is therefore "a lying intruder to be exposed and expelled through psychotherapy" (del Pilar Blanco and Pereen 2013: 34).[17] It is this approach to ghosts and hauntings that Derrida disagrees with, arguing instead that the ghost as a figure of ambiguity, difference, undecidability and multiplicity is not to be made away with, but welcomed. Hauntology, with its central concepts of *hospitality*, *justice* and *responsibility* revolves around such an openness towards the ghost. I will return to these concepts

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[17] For more on the lies and trickery of ghosts, see Chapter Five: A Trick and Corrections.

later in this introduction, since they play a vital part in the hauntological ethics I map out here. First, however, I would like to introduce the area of Monster Studies. Even though this text primarily centres on hauntology, it is also indebted to the current resurgence of academic interest in monsters. An interest that I understand as a critical response to no-nonsense cultures and imaginative poverty.

8.

Monster studies.

Even though *Spectres of Marx* played a significant role in returning the ghost to academia in the early 1990s, del Pilar Blanco and Pereen warn that the spectral turn is a "diffuse, extended cultural moment" (2014: 10), that reaches back into at least the 1970s. There were also other, simultaneous publications that helped get the ghost back on the map, of which del Pilar Blanco and Pereen mention Anthony Vidler's *The Architectural Uncanny* from 1992 and Terry Castle's *The Apparitional Lesbian* from 1993.

When it comes to the subject of monsters and the monstrous, both the (re)turn and the concept of the 'diffuse, extended cultural moment' seem fitting as well. In the foreword to *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous* (2013), historian Asa Mittman points to Cohen's anthology *Monster Theory* (1996) as a crucial contribution to the beginning of what may be understood as contemporary 'Monster Studies' or 'Monster Theory', both of which work as interdisciplinary umbrella terms for research that deal with the figure of the monster and the concept of the monstrous. Yet, Mittman also points to how research into monsters and the monstrous has a long and rich history that reaches well beyond the 1990s.

As previously mentioned, Braidotti is highly critical of the *ghost*'s ability to function as a guide through contemporary imaginative poverty and aporia. She does, however, find the *monster* to be a more promising figure for this job, and she

has written extensively on the history and critical potential of monsters and the monstrous. I will therefore turn to her work, in order to draw a brief overview of the history of the science and study of monsters.

Discussing the scientific history of monsters, Braidotti writes:

> For the sake of convenience, ever since the encyclopaedic work done in the nineteenth century by Geoffrey Saint-Hilaire, the scientific history of monsters has been divided into three major periods: classical antiquity, the pre-scientific and the scientific areas. To these traditional distinctions, I would like to add a fourth one: the genetic turning point in the post-nuclear era, also known as cybernetic teratology, and the making of new monsters due to the effects of toxicity and environmental pollution. (Braidotti 1999: 292)

Braidotti explains these strands of the scientific history of monsters further, saying that they involved certain discursive practices. For the monster of antiquity, such discursive practices were "climatic and geographical anthropologies" (1999: 300). She is referring here to how the monster of antiquity was largely imagined to inhabit the borders of the known world. They were the "monstrous races on the edge of civilisation" (Braidotti 1999: 293) of which Herodotus fabulated wildly. In the fifth century BC, he wrote on the cannibals and 'deformed' people who supposedly inhabited for example India and Ethiopia, and in the fourth century BC, Ktesias wrote on the Sciapodes, who only had one, large foot; the Cynocephali, a race of dog-headed people; and the Blemmyae, whose faces were in their stomachs. These monstrous races seeped into European medieval folklore, primarily through Pliny's Natural History.[18]

The second discourse of monster sciences belongs to the pre-scientific era and concerns theological divination (Braidotti 1999: 300). This discourse is less concerned with monstrous races at the margin and more interested in the birth of a monster – a deformed or otherwise anomalous body, whether human or animal

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[18] For more on the monstrous races, see Cohen 1996; Mittman 2006, 2013; Shildrick 2002.

- as a sign from God and a warning of what is yet to come. The monster paid for the divination with its life, as its body was opened and studied for signs of the future. The word 'monster' even means to demonstrate and to warn (Haraway 1991[B]: 2).

The study of the monster became known as teratology, the term Braidotti uses in her engagement with a cyber-teratological imaginary. According to Mittman, the term 'teratology' has been around since at least 1678, where it referred to "'a discourse of prodigies and wonders'", yet from the scientific era – the third on Braidotti's list – it became the "medical study of 'unnatural births'" (Mittman 2013: 2). In the scientific era, the opening of the monstrous body was no longer a question of theological research, but of scientific knowledge of the deformed body and its origins. The question of where do (deformed) babies come from propelled the research into the monster's body, making teratology the forerunner of anatomy and embryology.

The fourth period of monsters – Braidotti's 'cybernetic teratology' – is one that is still taking shape. I understand my own work as belonging to such a cybernetic teratology, though it is worth reiterating that my engagement with cybernetic teratology – or internet monsters – through the lens of hauntology and spectrality, is not necessarily something Braidotti would agree with.

In the following, I will be going into more detail with the interconnections between spectralities and Monster Studies.

9.

Worthwhile subjects of study. On ghosts and monsters.

When it comes to academic research, ghosts and hauntings on the one hand and monsters on the other are often divided according to the categories of spectralities and Monster Studies. Whereas ghosts and hauntings are usually engaged with as something abstract, a disturbance in time, space and presence, the monster is typically referred to as a figure of atypical and disturbing embodiment, something

that scrambles the categories of, for example, human and non-human. Yet, since both the ghost and the monster are unruly figures – the very reason that they have become popular not least within the areas of poststructuralist and postmodernist theory – they are of course difficult to distinguish completely from one another. After all, who is to say that a ghost is not a monster and that a monster cannot be a ghost? Further still, both the monster and the ghost belong to the category of 'nonsense' and that which 'does not matter', to refer back to del Pilar Blanco and Pereen. As such, they are a somewhat 'toxic subject' within academia, as del Pilar and Pereen put it, or in the words of Mittman, an 'un-worthwhile subject of study'. "Listen, Asa," a scholar once said to Mittman. "[Y]ou've got to drop all this monster stuff and start doing *real* scholarship." This made Mittman wonder: "What is 'real scholarship?' What constitutes a worthwhile subject of study?" (Mittman 2013: 2. Emphasis in original).

In *Spectres of Marx* Derrida wonders about such 'real' scholarship and 'worthwhile subjects of study' as well. Engaging with western metaphysics and the figure of the traditional western scholar – whom I am now picturing as the man, who in a "gruffly avuncular manner … leaned on his desk and said: 'Listen, Asa …'" (Mittman 2013: 2) – Derrida says:

> A traditional scholar does not believe in ghosts – nor in all that could be called the virtual space of spectrality. There has never been a scholar who, as such, does not believe in the sharp distinction between the real and the unreal, the actual and the inactual, the living and the non-living, being and non-being … in the opposition between what is present and what is not, for example in the form of objectivity. (Derrida 2011: 12)

The 'worthy' subject of study, when reading the avuncular scholar and the figure of the traditional western scholar through one another, seems to be 'objective reality', or: the world as it is, unchanging, hiding secrets that will eventually be discerned and mapped. This, to some extent, is not unlike Abraham's and Torok's

lying, intruding ghost, whose secrets will be revealed, its hauntings done away with, thereby showing the world as it is, unmarred by the unreality of spectres.

The monster and the ghost both fall into the category of the non-existent here, and therefore become 'unworthy' subjects of study. They also both fall into an unruly category of that which disturbs, which becomes even more visible in the concept of the 'monstrous'. "Although the image of the monster is long familiar in popular culture … it is in its operation as a concept – the monstrous – that it shows itself to be a deeply disruptive force", Shildrick explains (2002: 1). Like the concept of the spectral, the monstrous is something that disrupts time, space and a sense of presence. It is a tool that *does* theory through such disruptions, effecting a glimpse of how things could be different. This leads me to the monstrous *arrivant* (Derrida 2000; Shildrick 2002, 2009), which, I argue, brings the monstrous and the *revenant* together in the same figure.

The monstrous *arrivant*, I argue, is a *revenant*, that is, a spectre that 'walks again'/'returns'. The *arrivant* – a Derridean concept - refers to that which arrives without arriving, and which therefore remains undecidable.[19] In the case of the *arrivant* as a *revenant*, something emerges from the future but only through the movement of the return. This is the *re*volution of the ghost: it does not offer something 'radically new', as del Pilar Blanco and Pereen explain, but returns in ways that are "unpredictable and not always easily demarcated" (2013: 32). Indeed, the disturbing monstrousness of the *arrivant*, as well as the *revenant*'s "unmooring from defined points of departure, notions of linear progress, and fixed destinations", as del Pilar Blanco and Pereen put it previously (2013: 32), might offer routes that lead *through* the structures of aporia and anxiety, rather than leap across them. There is no outside of the belly of the monster, after all.

In the following, I will give an introduction to how I understand hauntology. I shall keep it somewhat brief, since this text in itself is a mapping out of a hauntological ethics with its very own monstrous *arrivants*. I shall therefore

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[19] I will go into much more detail with the figure of the monstrous *arrivant* throughout the text, but not least in Chapter Two: The Curse.

merely set up what I understand to be the basics of hauntology as well as what has worked as the stepping-stones for the mapping-exercise[20] of this text.

10.

The University of What It Is. Ontology and Haunting.

In *Welcome to Night Vale*, the main-character, Cecil, has been contacted via phone by Dr. Sylvia Kayali from The University of What It Is. "I told her I had never heard of that particular learning institution," he says, continuing:

> Actually, what happened is the name led to a comedic back and forth.
> "What *what* is?"
> "What It Is!"
> "The University is what?"
> "No, no, of 'What It Is.'"
> And so on.
> But eventually I accorded her the usual treatment of any academic person of importance – which was a bellowing lecture about the dangers of education, followed by a tense, suspicious silence.
> (*Welcome to Night Vale*. Episode 55: *The University of What It Is* [2014]. 03:12 - 03:51. Emphasis added.)

We, the listeners, do not get much information about The University of What It Is, but its name evokes the subject of ontology. Within traditional ontology, existence is typically understood through an emphasis on immediacy and presence, yet in the dialogue between Cecil and Dr. Kayali, the object – *it* - that needs to be made present and clear moves, taking on different meanings. When finally Cecil and Dr.

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[20] I will return to the question of theory-writing as a mapping-exercise in Chapter One: Tempting the Ghosts Out.

Kayali come to some sort of understanding, *it* is marred by a 'tense, suspicious silence' rather than an unproblematic connection.

By coining *hauntology*, Derrida aimed to critique the emphasis on presence and immediacy within traditional ontology by arguing that "nothing enjoys a purely positive existence" (Fisher 2014: 17). Indeed, as deconstruction in general is known to argue, all that can be said *to be* exists due to series of always deferred and absent others. An example is the relation between writing and speech, as Fisher explains:

> In the famous example, any particular linguistic term gains its meaning not from its own positive qualities but from its difference from other terms. Hence Derrida's ingenious deconstructions of the 'metaphysics of presence' and 'phonocentrism', which expose the way in which particular dominant forms had (incoherently) privileged the voice over writing. (Fisher 2014: 18)

Within traditional, western ontology speech is imagined to be closer to the intent of the speaker, meaning that there is less space between intent and expression. Immediacy and presence are thus connected to the voice, whereas writing separates the intent of the writer and his[21] expression, leaving space for trickery and forgery, for example. Derrida's argument is that even voice and speech – supposedly the vehicles of immediacy and presence – are indebted to absent and deferred spectral others. An example is the workings of language itself, as it makes it possible for the subject to speak and lends the subject a name, turning him into someone specific. Yet, this specificity is based on general structures that make the words the subject uses recognizable to others. As such, the subject is indebted to those who spoke the words before he was even alive, as well as to those who will

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[21] When discussing traditional philosophical notions, I will be referring to the subject as 'he', since the universally human subject within western history and philosophy has traditionally been understood to be male. I will be referring to the subject as 'she' when attempting to imagine agency differently. This is not to endorse the gender binary in general, but to acknowledge how female subjects are still heavily underrepresented, not least within scholarly thinking.

be able to recognize and speak them after he has gone. The same is the case with the name; it makes the subject specific, someone you can hail in a crowd, but only by being recognizable as a name and therefore something that can be carried by others as well. These others may be of the past, but they are also of the future – as well as existing simultaneously. Specificity, in other words, depends on a debt to ghosts: those who are to come and those who have been. As such, neither speech nor writing is based on immediacy and presence, but deferral and absence. Derrida exemplifies this through the workings of *différance*.

Différance is a wordplay that intends to critique the phonocentrism mentioned by Fisher. It derives from the French *différer*, which can mean to delay or postpone, as well as to differ/be different (Hill 2007: 15-16). Derrida added the *a*, which cannot be heard when the word is pronounced, but is visible in writing. This was in order to draw attention to how something excessive is at work in the spoken. Something absent that nonetheless lends presence to speech. Furthermore, the workings of absence in presence and delay in immediacy (the a in *différance*), also points to a general movement within being. Being, according to Derrida, is not static, but it also does not move according to a linear understanding of space and time, making it somewhat ghostly.

11.

Hauntology as ethics. On justice and responsibility.

Hauntology emphasises how there is no self-presence, no pure existence. Instead, ontology is relational, and it is the figure of the ghost – with its haunting connections across time and space – that shows forth this relationality. The spectre points beyond the moment and thereby beyond presence and immediacy. Its hauntings are about that which is yet to come, that which has been and that which may well never take place at all. "[T]he spectral … *is not*," Derrida explains, since it is "*never present as such*" (2011: xvii. Emphasis in original). Even though spectres

are never present as such, however, they are *there* nonetheless: "[t]hey are always *there*, specters, even if they do not exist, even if they are no longer, even if they are not yet" (Derrida 2011: 221. Emphasis in original). The relationality of the spectre is what makes hauntology a question of ethics as much as ontology. This is not morality, understood as a set of rules and duties that the human subject must follow in order to do *good*. Instead, it is a relational ethics that concerns how existence is always dependent on something else; something that is not present as such, something beyond the moment and beyond immediacy. A hauntological ethics thus steers according to two primary coordinates that are not *good* or *bad*, but *responsibility* and *justice*.

Both responsibility and justice are understood through their excessiveness, that is, their ability to reach beyond the moment, beyond presence and beyond immediacy. They are not about deliberate, conscious, moral actions, but about the effectivity and agency of the virtual, that is, the yet to come, and how this that is yet to come can disrupt and disturb presence with its absence. As Derrida puts is: "To be just: beyond the living present in general – and beyond its simple negative reversal. A spectral moment, a moment that no longer belongs to time, if one understands by this word the linking of modalized presents (past present, actual present: "now," future present)" (Derrida 2011: xix. Emphasis in 0riginal). In order to be "possible or thinkable", however, justice needs

> the principle of some *responsibility*, beyond all living present, within that which disjoins the living present, before the ghosts of those who are not yet born or who are already dead … Without this *non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present*, without that which secretly unhinges it, without this responsibility and this respect for justice concerning those who *are not there*, of those who are no longer or who are not yet *present and living*, what sense would there be to ask the question "where?" "where tomorrow?" "whither?" (Derrida 2011: xviii. Emphasis in original)

Responsibility is here understood as the ethical urgency to *respond* to that which does not exist in a traditional sense of the word. The response is not a reaction; whereas a reaction is somewhat predictable, since it follows a linear, mechanical causality, a response is that which surprises, disrupts and – as Derrida puts it - disjoins.[22] Staying open to such disturbing responses as they arrive from beyond the present and the immediate, is what responsibility and justice is about. In other words; it is about hospitality towards the monstrous *arrivant/revenant*.

As previously mentioned, the *arrivant* is that which arrives from the future. It is the virtual workings of the yet to come, and as such it never materialises. The ethical task, Derrida argues, is to not ask of it such a materialisation. In other words, one must show absolute hospitality[23] towards the *arrivant*. Such hospitality – at least if it is 'absolute' – should demand nothing of the guest. Instead, absolute hospitality greets the *arrivant* without demanding a name in return and without setting restrictions and boundaries for the guest. Such a hospitality towards the *arrivant* is risky, for it is impossible to predict how the encounter with the absolute and surprising other will go. As one allows the other inside, one changes – these changes can be painful and terrifying, but they may also open up to something so wonderful that it could never have been expected or even imagined in advance.

onwards

The text that you are about to read maps out a hauntological ethics by engaging with digital spectres and monsters. In other words, it picks up where Derrida left off by exploring the most recent development in tele-technology and its monsters. The aim is to find ways to think and imagine an ethics towards the undecidable, the not-quite-real, and the not-quite-there, for it is in undecidability and the

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[22] I will discuss the difference between response and reaction in more detail in Chapter Two: The Curse.
[23] I will go into more detail with the concept of absolute hospitality in Chapter Two: The Curse.

unpredictable that the other and the strange may arrive. In other words, hauntology offers a playful, imaginative theoretical framework for staying in the company of ghosts, even – no, *especially* – while in the grips of anxious aporia. Rather than demand the ghosts to materialise or disperse, this text asks: what does it mean to stay in the company of ghosts? And how might one respond to their responses?

The first step towards an exploration of such responses, I argue, lies in a stepping outside of text, only to find oneself back inside again, except the "warning misleads in that there is nothing likewise *inside* of the text. Nothing through and through", Appelbaum says (2009: ix. Emphasis in original). In this *nothing*, I argue, *something* may be found; a response, perhaps. Yet, when one cannot step either outside or inside, but always somehow ends up in-between, how does one write *about* such a nothing while seemingly caught in aporia? In the following chapter, Chapter One: Tempting the Ghosts Out, I will change writing-gear in order to move differently. Whereas I cannot say what this text well and truly *is*, I can, however, introduce the thoughts I have on how to write not *about* but *with* monsters, while suspended in the nothingness that is so crucial to a hauntological ethics. Whereas this introduction has been a putative look from afar (an attempted outside), the following chapter will be a look from within (an attempted inside), that zooms in on my own position as the writer of this text as well as the monsters I have encountered during my research. It is written in a more playful style that explores how writing may be monstrous in itself, that is, transgressive, cursed, contagious - a risky thing to engage with. Afterwards, I will move on to the main chapters of this text: The Curse, The Void and The Smile before ending with A Trick and Corrections.

CHAPTER ONE

Tempting the Ghosts Out

1.

"and anyone who read the article, anyone who took interest, would be affected."

Mr. L. wants to write about Smile.dog and, hopefully, produce "a few early college assignments and … some pieces of fiction".[24] Through his writing, he wants to expose the mystery of the Smile.jpg and discover the truth about the 'macabre cyber-legend', as he calls it. Yet, when it comes to curses, there is really only one way to know the 'truth', and soon Mr. L. finds that writing clearly and from a distance about monsters such as Smile.dog may not be possible at all. Wondering what he might do, and how it might affect his writing if the curse is real, he says:

> Whom would I burden in turn? If I went through with my earlier intention to write a short article about smile.jpg, I decided, I could attach it as evidence, and anyone who read the article, anyone who took interest, would be affected … would I be capricious enough to save myself in that manner?
>
> (*The Curious Case of Smile.jpg*, ca. 2008)

As the reader scrolls down, she gets the answer: Mr. L. has attached the Smile.jpg to the creepypasta or, as he calls it, 'the short article', making Mr. L.'s academic writing-style quite contagious indeed. Yet, whether this has 'saved' Mr. L. is impossible to say, for this is where his article ends: with more questions and less distance – to take an interest means to 'be between',[25] after all - than it began with. Rather than presenting the mystery of Smile.dog to the reader – unpacked,

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[24] *The Curious Case of Smile.jpg*, ca. 2008.
[25] Online Etymology Dictionary: interest (n.). Link:
http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=interest Last accessed: April 2016.

transparent and explained – Mr. L. has failed to write *about* the monster, that is, from the point of a distanced 'outside'.[26] Instead, the mystery seems to have swallowed both reader and writer, inviting them to participate in a new exploration and new discoveries, deferring the point of presence and immediacy and understanding to a different point in time. *Come find it*, the monster says. *Do as I say, and I'll give you the answer – I'll lift the curse and you can extract yourself from all of this and write 'about' something again*. Yet as Mary E. – someone who has lived in the company of Smile.dog for 16 years – says: "[I]f Smile.dog kept its word, I could sleep. Yet, if it lied, what would I do? And who was to say something worse would not come for me if I did as the creature asked?"[27] Mary E. is right – who is to say that monsters do not lie? After all, according to Torok and Abraham, *ghosts* are notorious liars. And if the monster lies, might something worse be yet to come?

In this chapter, I discuss what it might mean to write not *about* spectral monsters but *with* them and their broken promises. If one cannot engage with a creature such as Smile.dog from a distance, but always need to immerse oneself in its curse in order *to know*, what does it mean to write academically and objectively about such a subject? A possible answer, I argue, goes through the movement of failure – not as something inherently negative or as something to be reclaimed as a positive, but as the 'wandering' and 'going astray' mentioned in the introduction. In other words, whereas the introduction attempted an 'outside' perspective, I will here engage not with what this text (that you are about to read) *is*, but what it might *do*. If approached through a sense of movement, I argue, writing may offer a way of opening up to the undecidable, the unpredictable and the yet-to-come. Like in a dance, perhaps, where strange, sometimes absent feet map out a *patterned vision of how to move and what to fear*, as Donna Haraway is about to say. In other words, this chapter will be a short introduction to the general writing-style of this

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[26] Online Etymology Dictionary: about (adv.). "'[o]n the outside of'". Link: http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=about Last accessed: April 2016.
[27] *The Curious Case of Smile.jpg*, ca. 2008.

text, as well as my argument that writing, hauntology and ethics cannot be neatly separated, nor should they.

2.

Writing as a method of enquiry.

In the article 'Writing – a Method of Enquiry' (2000 [1995]), social scientist Laurel Richardson critiques the idea of research being something that takes place separate from writing. Traditionally, research is understood as the procuring of a truth, which is then related to an audience via writing, making writing a mere tool of representation. This is the way of the ghost-denying scholar in Derrida's work, whom I discussed in the introduction: "A traditional scholar does not believe in ghosts – nor in all that could be called the virtual space of spectrality", Derrida says. "There has never been a scholar who, as such, does not believe in the sharp distinction between … what is present and what is not, for example in the form of objectivity" (Derrida 2011: 12). It may also be the way of the 'avuncular academic' encountered by Mittman, and it is definitely the way of Mr. L., until he tries to write *about* rather than *with* Smile.dog.

Richardson, however, argues that writing is performative. It creates rather than mirrors, and it does so through its failure to fully *be* what it aims to represent. Speaking as a social scientist, Richardson explains:

> In standard social scientific discourse, methods for acquiring data are distinct from the writing of the research report, the latter presumed to be an unproblematic activity, a transparent report about the world studied. When we view writing as a *method*, however, we experience 'language-in-use,' how we 'word the world' into existence (Rose, 1992) … This 'worded world' never accurately, precisely, completely captures the studied world, yet we persist in trying. (Richardson 2000: 923. Emphasis in original)

Description is always a failure to some extent, since it can never fully *be* what it attempts to address. There will always by a gap, a fissure, a void between the world and the word. Instead, writing *creates* something *different*, making it a process of exploration and discovery of terrains that take (and become) place *in writing*, not prior to it. As such, I argue, writing has much in common with map-making, not least through the question of failure to be what is represented.

Maps do not just show how some terrains and structures relate to one another, but actively shape and create the worlds they try to represent. In other words, they do not offer full presence and immediacy but *lie*. "Not only is it easy to lie with maps, it's essential," geographer Mark Monmonier explains. "A map must distort reality" (quoted in Mittman 2006: 30). If a map does not distort reality, it would *be* the reality it tries to map, it would *be* absolute presence with no delay, no deferral. In other words, it would embody the ideal of traditional ontology by merging intent and being. The 'worded world', to quote Richardson quoting Rose, would become the studied world, there would be no voids, no abysses, only complete and utter immediacy. *Soon we had no need for government cover-ups, or secrets*, Kevin – one of the monsters of this text – will later say, excitedly. *Everything was transparent. Literally. You could see through everything and everyone.*[28] He has met the Smiling God, and all is immediate, all is presence. There are no secrets left and therefore also – as Torok and Abraham might have approved of – no ghosts. Yet, the attempt to provide such 'transparent report', as Richardson calls it, as well as immediacy and presence fails in writing and mapping, where word and world never become fully one. Instead, the map and the text *must* fail, and in this failure, they lie – even if that was never the intention. In this failure, in this never-intended lie, something different from the author's intent takes shape. "Writing *does* things," Haraway explains. "Writing is a very particular and surprising process" (2000: 53. Emphasis added). In this surprising *doing*, writing becomes a mapping-exercise

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[28] See Chapter Four: The Smile.

itself, that is, a calling forth[29] of terrains that did not exist prior to the process of writing.

According to Haraway, the performative failures of language open up to different and imaginative ways of writing theory. In the article 'The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others' (1992), she argues for theory-writing as a mapping-exercise, that is, as something performative and explorative:

> "The Promises of Monsters" will be a mapping exercise and travelogue … The purpose of this excursion is to write theory, i.e., to produce a patterned vision of how to move and what to fear in the topography of an impossible but all-too-real present, in order to find an absent, but perhaps possible, other present. I do not seek the address of some full presence; reluctantly, I know better … The theory is meant to orient, to provide the roughest sketch for travel … to a science fictional, speculative factual, SF place called, simply, elsewhere …
> My diminutive theory's optical features are set to produce not effects of distance, but effects of connection, of embodiment, and of responsibility for an imagined elsewhere that we may yet learn to see and build here. (Haraway 1992: 295)

According to Haraway, theory-writing is explorative as well as a mapping exercise and travelogue that both engage with 'an impossible but all-too-real present' as well as an 'absent, but perhaps possible, other present'. The maps she suggests are thus not attempts at depicting the world as it is, which would be impossible. They are also not itineraries, leading to the 'address of some full presence'. Instead, the process of mapping becomes a question of learning to see that which is not there (yet); an imagined elsewhere.

To Robinson, writing is also a question of movement and exploration, as she asks: "Whither and whence?" (2000: 936). Derrida repeats this in his discussion of justice: "'where tomorrow?' 'whither?'" (2011: xviii). How can there be justice –

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[29] I will return to the question of mapping-exercises as a 'calling forth' – that is, as a conjuration - in Chapter Five: A Trick.

in the form of openness to the arrival of the unknown – without this question of playful movement, of the *beyond* the instant, he asks. This, I argue, also becomes a question of a *beyond the text* – not an *outside* of text, but a *beyond* the instant, a beyond the author's intent. In Derrida's work, this 'beyond' is hinted at through his own playful writing; in *Spectres of Marx*, for example, sentences contradict each other (*To live otherwise, and better. No, not better, but more justly*); they call upon other texts, such as Shakespeare's *Hamlet*; they shift between languages. In yet another text, *The Animal that Therefore I Am* (2008), Derrida even points to a spectre that will haunt that script by putting it in a footnote, as if pointing to the experience of reading and writing as a question of moving *with* an absent present companion, to the rhythm of silent footsteps: "Although I don't have time to do so, I would of course have liked to inscribe my whole talk within a reading of Lewis Carroll", he says. "In fact you can't be certain that I am not doing that, for better or for worse, *silently*, unconsciously, or without your knowing" (2008: 7. Emphasis added).[30] I will return to this question of the movement of silent footsteps later in this chapter.

Another example of someone who writes playfully, yet with the serious aim of *doing* theory and ethics differently, is of course Haraway. She says:

> I like layered meanings, and I like to write a sentence in such a way that – by the time you get to the end of it – it has at some level questioned itself. There are ways of blocking the closure of a sentence, or of a whole piece, so that it becomes hard to fix its meanings. (Haraway 2000: 54)

Both Derrida and Haraway open the text to wandering by magnifying the absences, the gaps, the voids, fissures – even *lies* - of Richardson's playfully failing 'worded world'. They do not want to fix the meaning of a given text or sentence, but allow for that meaning to wander – like the slippery 'it' that went astray between Cecil and Dr. Kayali. This, of course, does not mean that writers such as Derrida and

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[30] This is a point I will repeat, in a footnote, in Chapter Four: The Smile.

Haraway do not have intentions with their texts. What it means is that these intentions always fail to manifest in the head of the reader, untainted and precisely as they were thought, since they need to cross the abyss, the fissure, the gaps between author and reader, word and world. Further still, the intent is rarely singular, clear and easily defined to begin with, but takes shape as the writer writes, not least if she applies writing as a method of enquiry. Or, as in my case, *re*writing as a method of enquiry. Like many other researchers, I explore my material through repeated *re*writing, trying again and again and again to make word and world fit and always failing. This means that I keep returning – *revenant*-like – to an author with whom I share a life, but who is no longer me; she is a ghost, undead, mutely speaking from within the text and trying to teach me something about why and how she went astray. Through this return, not just my own ghost, but those of multiple others, are evoked, speaking through me and my ghost, ventriloquizing us. This is a point I will return to later in this chapter as well as in Chapter Four: The Smile and Chapter Five: A Trick. For now, my point is that the author's intent is never solely her own, nor does it preexist the text or the encounter with the reader. Least of all when that reader is the writer's future self.

In their playful and imaginative ways of writing, Haraway and Derrida point to the absences, gaps, fissures, abysses and voids that are needed in order for writing to become present, as well as how the deferrals caused by such absences and gaps mean that the intent of the author cannot be handed over to the reader, whole and clear and moulded prior to the encounter between writer and writing, reader and reading. In other words, it is due to haunting absences – including the writer's own ghost - that something else may take and become place, making imagination and playfulness serious ethical business: this is the whither and whence of justice-to-come, where there is no "self-explanatory transparency" (2008: 173), as Braidotti puts it, and therefore also no Smiling God of immediacy, presence and the secret-less. In the terrains of justice, one must show *responsibility for an imagined elsewhere that we may yet learn to see and build*, as Haraway puts it in the previous quote. In other words, engaging with the yet-to-come via writing

demands ethical responsibility towards a beyond. It also demands a rethinking of objectivity, so that it may be something different from the understanding of objectivity presented by Derrida's traditional scholar above, that is, one established on strict dualisms, not least between subject and object, self and other, presence and absence. Such dualisms cannot help the researcher engage ethically as well as objectively with something that she cannot write about from a distance, but which is contagious, even cursed. Furthermore, if it is also writing itself – as is my argument here – that is cursed, something transgressive that sucks in both reader and writer and demands to be spread in return (*spread the word*), then a dualistic understanding of subject and object, writing and the object of research, writer and reader is an unhelpful starting point for thinking objectivity. Finally, there is the question of justice to come, which must remain spectral, neither fully present nor absent, that is, something that will take place *through* research as well as point *beyond* the intent of the researcher towards an elsewhere yet to materialise. Here, dualisms prove unhelpful as well. But how, then, does one imagine and perform an objectivity of *elsewheres* and the *beyond*?

3.

Objectivity as situated knowledges and partial perspectives.

"Stop while you are still whole,"[31] Mary E. writes to Mr. L., asking him to stop his pursuit for Smile.dog. Otherwise, the curse will transgress his bodily boundaries, shattering his sense of a unified, separate self, making him live with a monster. But Mr. L. does not listen; like Derrida's traditional scholar, he seems to believe in a divide between the real and the unreal, presence and absence, the actual and the inactual, being and non-being (Derrida 2011: 12). Within this understanding of scholarship – *real* scholarship, as Mittman's avuncular academic might call it - there is a true and unchanging world out there to explore through objective means. Such

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[31] *The Curious Case of Smile.jpg*, ca. 2008.

means have traditionally been associated with *distance*, as Haraway points out, not least via the metaphors of vision that produce a detached god-eye-perspective – what Haraway refers to as the god-trick (1991: 191), and what Kevin might simply call the Smiling God.

The god-trick relies on the assumption that subject and object can be separated and that a static, absolute truth concerning the object of knowledge can be claimed without somehow changing, contaminating or *cursing* the researcher in return. This is a truth that supposedly has nothing to do with the scientist and the tools that he used to find it. To Haraway, however, such detachment and distance is not possible. Like Derrida, she argues for a relational ontology, a world that does not preexist its encounters and therefore cannot be viewed from a distance or written 'about' while remaining 'untainted'. Even the scientist must participate in what she calls the 'dance of relating': "all … actors become who they are *in the dance of relating*, not from scratch, not ex nihilo, but full of the patterns of their sometimes-joined, sometimes-separate heritages both before and lateral to *this* encounter. All the dancers are redone through the patterns they enact" (2008: 25. Emphasis in original). The researcher is here invited to 'join with another': "The knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original," Haraway argues. "[I]t is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly, and *therefore* able to join with another …" (Haraway 1991[C]: 193. Emphasis in original). In this sense, Mary E. got it wrong: there was never any wholeness to begin with.

According to Haraway, objectivity can never be a question of preserving an originary distance and detachment, but must take seriously the transgressive movement of the dance of relating. To Haraway, objectivity therefore becomes a question not of universality and the general, but of "particular and specific embodiment" (1991[C]: 190), meaning that the eyes that see should stay accountable for what they have seen, from where they have seen it and *how*. "Feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about

transcendence and splitting of subject and object," she writes. "In this way we might become answerable for what we learn how to see" (Haraway 1991[C]: 190).

Returning to 'Promises of Monsters', objective theory-writing as a mapping-exercise becomes a question not of presenting the world as it exists in a vacuum somewhere, but showing what a terrain looks like from the highly specific position of *this* encounter between *this* researcher – who learned to see in a very specific way - and the world. Somewhat paradoxically, it is this specificity that opens up to a *beyond the text*; by not claiming universal knowledge, the text points to the margins of the known, as well as to as yet unexplored terrains that can only exist when and if the reader encounters the text. In other words, through objectivity as situated knowledges and partial perspectives, along with playful and imaginative writing that is not first of all about the intentions of the author, writing extends an invitation to the reader to explore and discover something that did not preexist her encounter with the text. To Haraway, this is an invitation that takes the shape of "active rewriting as reading" (1992: 327), or a 'risky reading strategy', as she calls it. This strategy is not about making a text come out 'right' – such as by exposing the lies of a ghost or the failures of a monster – but about making texts "*move 'differently'*" (1992. Emphasis added), in a dance of relating. This text extends a similar invitation (to dance), that is, to move *differently* through a companionship where the outcome is not given in advance. As such, this text (that you are about to read) is a *vade mecum*[32], an invitation to 'go with me'. Or, perhaps more to the point, considering how I will be following a guide: *us*. 'Go with us'.[33]

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[32] *Vade mecum* is another word for 'companion' and means 'go with me'. I discuss this in more detail in Chapter Four: The Smile. See: Online Etymology Dictionary: vade-mecum (n.). Link: http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=vade-mecum&allowed_in_frame=0 Last accessed: April 2016.

[33] The multiplicity of the 'us' also refers to how all speaking subjects are ventriloquized by ghosts, as briefly discussed in the introduction. This is a point I will return to later in this chapter, but discuss in more detail in Chapter Four: The Smile, Chapter Five: A Trick and in Corrections.

When *nothing* happens.

Referring to Haraway, this text is a mapping-exercise that sets out to '*provide the roughest sketch for travel*', which is not a static representation, but a performative *doing* that aims to '*produce a patterned vision of how to move and what to fear in the topography of an impossible but all-too-real present, in order to find an absent, but perhaps possible, other present*'. Whereas Haraway's guide through such map-making is Lisa Foo, the main character of John Varley's sci-fi short story *Press Enter* from 1986, mine is Smile.dog.

As in the case of Mr. L. – with whom I share an initial – it was Smile.dog who taught me that writing is contagious, that it infects and that it always passes *something* on, not least when one thinks that there is really *nothing* there, only silence, a gap, a fissure, a void. Or perhaps an abyss, as feminist theorist Astrid Schrader argues in her work on the concept of 'abyssal intimacies'.[34] Describing her encounter with some specific paintings, Schrader explains how she was moved in a way that removed the steady ground from underneath her feet and opened up to an abyss, leaving her

> suspended in a zone of indeterminacy, hesitating, slowing down, not exactly knowing what to do, confused, listening intensely to what might still be hidden before and behind the painting … These paintings move us, but they do not necessarily move us *in* time, they do not prompt us to immediate (re-)action, literal movement, as if we already knew in advance what would be the right thing to do … (Schrader 2015: 683. Emphasis in original)

In my case, it was Smile.dog that moved me as it for the briefest of moments removed the ground from underneath my feet, suspending me in an abyss that was

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[34] I am grateful to Lisa Lindén, who suggested I read Schrader's article 'Abyssal Intimacies and Temporalities of Care: How (not) to care about deformed leaf bugs in the aftermath of Chernobyl' (2015). I will be discussing the figure of the abyss in more detail in Chapter Three: The Void.

not *in* time, but somehow *beyond* that brief moment as I listened intensely for *something* that might be arriving from out of the *nothing*.

I came across *The Curious Case of Smile.jpg* on a winter-evening in the first year of my research. Having recently discovered creepypasta, I had printed out a few stories from a creepypasta-site and was reading them on my way home, sitting alone in the dark on the top-floor of the bus. I knew, of course, that there was a picture of a dog somewhere in the pile, since I had spotted it while printing, and I was waiting for it to appear as I made my way through the various stories –

- and *there* it was. The story of Smile.jpg and the picture of the grinning dog sitting in my lap. I took it in – how could I not! – and like Mr. L. I decided to write about Smile.dog. I brought its picture to workshops and conferences and, again like Mr. L., I even added it to the first article I wrote (Henriksen 2014[A]). I liked the idea of a cursed picture; it was a cheap thrill and a hoax, a small trick.[35] As soon as the monster had appeared and *nothing* had happened – no "temporal lobe epilepsy and acute anxiety"[36] and, later, no nightmares – the curse was gone again, as was the demon dog. There was just – silence. It was all quite harmless, really.

Things changed, however, as I began wondering about Mary E.'s warning: *if it lied, what would I do?* What if the monster had, indeed, lied? Or if it had failed at its initial trajectory, meaning that it was simply delayed, wandering, straying but on its way? In other words: *what if the void is not as void as we thought?* as the radio-host Cecil Palmer will later say.[37] What if *something* stares back from the silence and the *nothing*? What if the failure and the lies of the monster merely serve to defer it, possibly infinitely, mapping out an unfolding terrain of waiting and expectation? Perhaps it will arrive now? or *now*? how about NOW?[38] And all the while, you *feel its effect*; even as it fails, as it lies, as it tricks and hoaxes, the absent monster that is yet to arrive has an effect in the present. For a brief instant, I felt

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[35] I discuss the idea of the curse as a hoax and a trick in the concluding chapter, Chapter Five: A Trick.
[36] *The Curious Case of Smile.jpg*, ca. 2008.
[37] See Chapter Three: The Void.
[38] I will discuss this series of 'nows' in more detail in Chapter Two: The Curse.

the steady ground give way underneath my feet; here, now, for the smallest of moments, I glimpsed *something* while suspended in a zone of indeterminacy. The void was not as void as I had thought; when *nothing* happened in the encounter with Smile.dog, *something* did, too. How was I to respond to that? How was I to address the silence? And how was I to map out this abyssal space of indeterminacy according to patterns of 'how to move' and 'what to fear' without closing it down and 'fixing its meaning', to refer back to Haraway?

5.

A dance of absent feet.

"I remember as a kid … going to the movies and seeing the monsters - whether it was the Frankenstein Monster or the Mummy, or whatever – and being frightened and loving it. But always being aware that it was a guy dressed up", Terry Nation says. "I guess it was the legs that did it. You know, there was a human shape there somewhere. However strange, it was still a *human shape*" (Rigby 2013: 15. Emphasis added). Nation is the creator of the Daleks, the mutant cyborg villains of the BBC sci-fi TV-series *Doctor Who* (1963 – present). These are sometimes described as over-sized pepper pots with eyestalks and, very importantly, *no legs* since Nation "wanted to take the legs off, to take them away from any kind of human image" (Rigby 2013: 15). Indeed, as the journalist Jonathan Rigby explains, Nation was inspired by "ballerinas [who] wore enveloping skirts that concealed the movement of their feet" and that he "envisaged a race of power-crazed mutants who have retreated into metal shells, within which they propose to *glide* their way to intergalactic domination" (2013: 15. Emphasis in original).

By removing the legs, Nation removed an important mark of how humans have traditionally been understood as 'exceptional' from the natural world, that is, the narrative of human beings as the only creatures to stand up on two legs, rising above the ground. In this 'rising', human feet came to beat out a very specific

rhythm, at least according to a writer such as Elias Canetti, who wrote on the question of legs and rhythm three years before Nation created the Daleks. "Rhythm is originally the rhythm of feet," Canetti says. "Every human being walks, and, since he walks on two legs with which he strikes the ground in turn and since he only moves if he continues to do this, whether intentionally or not, a rhythmic sound ensues" (1984: 31). I refer to Canetti here since he magnifies what seems to make the Daleks monstrous; they are moulded according to a female form – and therefore not the universal, male subject – and they are leg- and feetless. Rather than beat out the music of the human, they *glide*, silently. As such, the Daleks – like all monsters – belong on the other side of the very particular abyss that separates humans from their non-human others, or "the abyss … between 'man' [sic] and 'animal'", as Schrader (2015: 670. '[sic]' in original) puts it. Haraway agrees, pointing out how "to be human is to be on the opposite side of the Great Divide from all others and so to be afraid of – and in bloody love with – what goes bump in the night" (2008: 11).

Mapping out what to fear thus seems to revolve around the abyss, the divide, the nothingness of a void that is set in place in order to separate the human from all that is non-human. This is, however, an unstable divide, and as Schrader argues, the abyss may open up underneath the two feet of the human traveller rather than between him and his others, revealing a spectral realm of absences that have been pushed aside in order for immediacy and presence to take shape. Suddenly they are no longer at a distance - *My diminutive theory's optical features are set to produce not effects of distance, but effects of connection*, Haraway wrote above about her mapping-exercise - but *something* into which the subject is immersed. Further still; this 'collapse' of distance as the abyss opens up underneath the feet of the traveller does not always come with the warning 'bump in the night' mentioned by Haraway. Sometimes the creatures of the abyss move without a sound – and without feet - arriving unexpectedly.

As previously mentioned, it was Smile.dog that taught me about the contagion of writing. It did so by failing, wandering and possibly lying, for even if

you do as it tells you, who is to say that something worse is not still to come? The curse has not been contained, it has merely been passed on, circulating, wandering, going astray. When will you meet it again? Now? Maybe … *now*? It is difficult to say, for Smile.dog – not unlike the Daleks – moves without feet. Looking at its picture, all one sees is the blood-splattered Polaroid framing the darkness of the void in which the dog lives, a human arm extending past its grinning face. Its paws are somewhere behind the frame, hidden, invisible, in a space of not-knowingness. It may well move in a transgressive glide – *creeping* like any creepypasta would - as the blood on the frame seems to indicate, turning what used to be inside outside and vice versa, but silently, without the rhythm of two feet to beat out a warning.

The haunting of ghosts – when not making bumps in the night – is silent, often manifesting not as sound as such, but the trembling of absence in presence. This is the mark of writing as well, David Appelbaum argues, for in writing, the voice of the writer trembles in the words, like the mute "ghost 'a' found in *différance*" (2009: 94); a presence without voice, something that is *there*, helping to move the text along, but silently. As discussed in the introduction, the ghost 'a' of *différance* indicates disturbing absences in presence and therefore a certain movement in being; not a linear, straight forward movement, but the movement of a relational ontology – a *hauntology* - where worlds are formed and undone in encounters. In other words, I argue that the movement of 'a' can be understood as one of companionship, a *vade mecum*: 'go with me'. No, 'go with *us*'. This companionship is not least at play in the relation between writer, reader, text and ghosts.

In reading, the spectral 'I' is read and rewritten by the reader, who gives the silent trembling a voice. "The reading gives voice to the voice of the writer, which does not simply copy the reader's effort", Appelbaum explains, saying that this "giving of voice … is a ghost performance that refuses clarity and distinctness, revels in equivocity, and trembles in the intermittent seizure of owning itself qua itself" (Appelbaum 2009: 9). The ghost of the writing 'I' trembles in writing and is repeated by the reading 'I' that gives it a voice that is almost the same, but not quite – not even when the writer returns to read herself in order to rewrite. This,

too, is an encounter between ghosts and one must give the other a voice, not least when the other is the other within the self, the silent trembling of absence in presence. Or, as Derrida puts it, one should learn to talk with ghosts and "give them back speech, even if it is in oneself, in the other, in the other in oneself" (2011: 221). The other in oneself may well be one's own ghost, returning from the past, ready to haunt the future.

Reading as a 'giving voice' makes it difficult to distinguish between reader and writer as well as the 'new' voice that takes shape in the encounter. In the 'seizure' of the reading and writing 'I' - in its trembling as it is held in the grip of aporia - I see Smile.dog's promise of *onset temporal lobe epilepsy and acute anxiety*, that is, something transgressive and contaminating that grabs the reader and takes hold, reaching out – like a pale arm - from the void between the world and the word. In this reaching out, writing demands something of the reader:[39] that she gives it her voice and that she takes its voice in return. This is a transgressive demand that turns reading and writing into a risky affair where one is never alone, but always in the company of *something* lurking in the *nothing*. In other words; when reading and writing, one is in the company of ghosts, participating in a – silent, gliding - dance of relating as trembling,[40] where self and other must give one another a voice and become something that they were not prior to that specific encounter.[41] It is this movement – writing and reading as a dance of relating on absent feet – that Smile.dog teaches. It is writing as contagion and as a curse.

6.

From this sea of ghosts. Coordinates and monster-making.

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[39] I will return to the question of the demands of that, which arrives from the void in Chapter Three: The Void and Chapter Four: The Smile.

[40] Dancing and trembling are etymologically related. See Online Etymology Dictionary: dance (v.). Link: http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=dance Last accessed: April 2016.

[41] In the dance of relating, self and other also give each other a face (and a mouth). I discuss this in Chapter Four: The Smile.

In this book, I have gathered stories that all, in some way or another, have moved me in a way that – even if just for the briefest of moments – meant that the ground underneath my feet gave way to an abyss and a zone of indeterminacy, making me listen intensely for the arrival of *something* out of *nothing*. As mentioned in the introduction, these stories are *The Curious Case of Smile.jpg*, *Welcome to Night Vale*, *Mushroom Land TV/Smile Guide*, the story of Emily, who haunts her boyfriend Nathan via Facebook as well as the picture *Smile*. I engage with these internet stories and their monsters from my own partial perspective as an everyday user of digital technologies, and therefore as someone puzzled and sometimes incredibly frustrated with these technologies that seem to have a will and agency of their own. There seems to be a trembling in their depths, and I *feel its effect*, to refer back to Robinson, not least in the form of a demand to give *something*: my voice, as I speak on the phone; written words, as I seek access to a password-protected website; another digital device, as my mobile phone and laptop speak together through code, in order to let me access my bank-account. I give these technologies *something* so that they may respond by bringing a different *something* out of *nothing*, out of their hidden, invisible registers, these spectral spaces of not-knowingness. And as I give them *something*, they become aware of me in return. I can no longer control what they will do with this bit of me, nor what that bit will become. At times, I cannot even control whether that initial giving means that they can keep taking, silently, without me ever noticing.[42]

My interest in the hidden depths of digital technologies and the tales of monsters that they spark has been formed by my own situated knowledges and

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[42] I am skating over big and important issues of privacy and the distribution and selling of private information online here. Since this is not a media studies text, however, and since I am writing from the perspective of an everyday user of digital technologies – who often wonders and gets irritated at the strange workings of such technologies – I have chosen not to go into a discussion of these issues. Indeed, it is the 'not-knowing' of the casual internet-user that, I argue, is interesting in the context of the monsters and urban legends that haunt the world wide web.
I discuss the interconnections between monsters and the 'depths' of the web in more detail in Chapter Three: The Void.

partial perspectives. I work in Sweden but am originally from Denmark, and in both countries digital technologies are more of less an inherent part of everyday life, especially in most workplaces. I am aware that this is far from the case on a global scale, which is why the hauntological ethics I am mapping out here does not make any claim to be a universal one. Indeed, considering the relational nature of hauntology, this would be an impossible claim in any context. Rather than attempt a 'universal hauntological ethics', I therefore apply writing as a method of enquiry in order to explore the terrains, the monsters and the narratives of these very specific digital stories. I do so not in order to make these stories 'come out right', as Haraway puts it, but in order to see what terrains and what monsters such a method may help create. This, I argue, is what writing as a dance of relating *does* - "when it's not boring",[43] the ghost of Derrida adds. He waves his hand at empty space, as if to indicate how he himself is immersed in a sea of ghosts, and continues:

> In fact, it's because I wished to tempt the ghosts out that I agreed to appear in a film. It could perhaps offer both us and them the chance to evoke the ghosts: The ghost of Marx, the ghost of Freud, the ghost of Kafka … even yours! I only met you this morning, but to me you're already permeated by all sorts of phantom figures. (*Ghost Dance* 1983. 20:28 – 21:00)

I, too, wish to tempt the ghosts out. Derrida himself is one of these ghosts, as he knew he would be - "[h]ere, the ghost is me,"[44] he says in *Ghost Dance* - but he is not alone: here, the ghost is also that of Haraway and Schrader, of Charles Ess, Cecil Palmer, Smile.dog, Braidotti, Appelbaum and Emily, Cohen, Mittman, the traditional scholars; all of these ghosts that haunt this text, giving me voices with which to speak. Yet, I also want to tempt out the ghosts who do not have names, those who are at the margins of what I know, those that do not exist (yet), that is, the monstrous *arrivants* of the yet to come. As such, I do not offer a universal,

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[43] *Ghost Dance* 1983. 16:50 – 16:55. Derrida is not speaking directly about writing here, though, but cinema.
[44] *Ghost Dance* 1983. 16:09 – 16:12.

general hauntological ethics, but a road-map of spectral terrains drawn from my own highly specific perspective as someone from a Nordic country, who engages with digital technology on an everyday basis, but without expert knowledge. In a scholarly context, my perspective is not one formed by philosophy or media studies, for example, nor do I make any claim to be a 'Derrida scholar'. Instead, I offer a 'tempting out of ghosts' through the lens of my own academic background in literature and gender studies. Both these areas of study have taught me how research and writing can be processes of enquiry and not least of creative and playful engagements that are nonetheless a serious ethical matter.

The remaining text is written not in the traditional vein that I used for the introduction, but in more of a stream that aims to bring together the voices of monsters and theorists alike, tempting out the ghosts by pointing to the stitches that hold the text together. The text, like its writers and readers, is not whole, but full of abysses, gaps and voids from which something may reach out - a pale arm from the darkness, perhaps – to grab the reader, pulling her in or drawing itself out. The ethical task of writing a hauntological ethics, I argue, is to keep these abysses open and one way to do so, is to emphasise how the writing 'I' that trembles in this text is a highly specific one,[45] but one that is made possible through the ghostly structures of language itself. This opens the text up to an outside, a *beyond* the author's intent that reaches into the past (language is older than me) as well as the future (language will survive me). It also – silently, without warning – reaches into the reader, asking that its trembling be given a voice. *Speak me*, it says. *Spread the word*. As such, through the specificity – the partial perspective and situated knowledges – of the writing 'I', a *beyond* the text and *beyond* the author is hinted at, opening up to that, which does not exist – yet, or maybe ever. In the dance of relating between the specific and the general, self and other, reader and writer, *something* takes shape. A monster, perhaps, with secrets of its own.

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[45] Here, I have been touching upon my own specificity in connection with my encounter with Smile.dog. In Corrections, I will do so again, but this time in connection with *Smile*.

Smile.dog is my guide through this text, and I am therefore moving according to coordinates found in its picture, that is: the *curse*, the *void* of the darkness behind it and the *smile*. By exploring these coordinates, I will map out possible elsewheres as well as what 'to fear', as Haraway puts it, though 'fear' is here replaced by 'anxiety', as travelling the abyss brings the subject close to the *nothing* and the void that – according to Lacanian theory – sparks anxiety. This is an anxiety that – as I will go on to argue in more detail in Chapter Three: The Void – fragments the imagined ideal body, making the subject more related to the legless and feetless monster than he may care to think. Rather than alleviate this fragmenting anxiety, however, I argue for a staying in the tense awaiting that is anxious aporia, in the expectation and yearning for the monstrous *arrivant*, that is, the lying, failing monster that should have been here by *now*.

Here is a short itinerary, following the Smile.dog coordinates:

In **Chapter Two: The Curse**, I will discuss the differences between relational ethics and morality. I argue that hauntology may be understood as an ontology of the virtual and therefore an ethics of responsibility towards the agency and workings of the spectral. Engaging with Haraway's risky reading strategies, I also suggest a rewriting of *The Curious Case* that brings out possible, spectral responses.

In **Chapter Three: The Void**, I explore the question of *something* and *nothing*, not least through the figure of the abyssal void. I argue that this abyssal void can be found in the cultural imaginary of tele-technologies and the anxiety they may spark. This chapter therefore revolves around *Welcome to Night Vale* – especially its omnipresent void and its relations to tele-technology – as well as the story of Emily, who haunts her boyfriend Nathan via Facebook. I will also be drawing on the urban legends of the uncharted parts of the web, that is, the so-called Deep

Web. Through these stories, I map out possible spectral terrains in the encounter between *nothing*, *something* and the web.

In **Chapter Four: The Smile**, I ask what it might mean to follow a ghost, that is, to take it as one's guide and companion. Here, I touch upon some of the themes I have raised in this chapter on writing, such as the relation with the other as a question of hospitality as one offers something of oneself, whether this is a voice or a face that may smile. The smile, I argue, forms part of a dance of relating that is a *danse macabre* as one reminds the other of the skull in the mouth. In this chapter, I will primarily engage with Kevin, the smiling monster from *Welcome to Night Vale*, as well as Agatka, the host of *Mushroom Land TV*'s *Smile Guide*.

Chapter Five: A Trick offers an open ending by suggesting that hauntological ethics is not about mapping out what is already present and *there*, but about conjuring something forth, that is, performing a trick and a hoax. In this chapter, I discuss *Smile*; a creepypasta picture that, like Smile.jpg, is supposedly cursed.

Corrections[46] is a conjuration.

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[46] In Corrections, I refer to as well as paraphrase the stories and theory I discuss in this text. At times, I also quote directly from a text. Since I do not reference the narratives in the Corrections section itself, I will list the stories that I quote here:
Welcome to Night Vale. Episode 25: *One Year Later* (2013).
Welcome to Night Vale. Episode 38. *Orange Grove* (2014).
My dead girlfriend keeps messaging me on Facebook (2014).

CHAPTER TWO
The Curse

1.

"And you? Do you believe in ghosts?"

"I'd like to ask you something. Do you believe in ghosts?" Pascale asks Derrida in the film *Ghost Dance* from 1983. The question prompts Derrida to discuss the interconnections between ghosts, time and space as well as communication technologies, before he finally answers her directly, saying: "Whether I believe in ghosts or not I say: 'Long live the ghosts'. And you, do you believe in ghosts?"[47]

Some years later, while teaching in America, Derrida watched *Ghost Dance* again, hearing Pascale Ogier - the character and the actress – respond to his question from 1983: "Yes, now I do, yes" (Derrida 2013: 40). Ogier had died of a heart attack a year after the release of the film, making Derrida-the-viewer wonder:

> Which now? … I had the unnerving sense of the return of her specter, the specter of her specter coming back to say to me – to me here, now: "Now … now … now, that is to say, in this dark room on another continent, in another world, here, now, yes, believe me, I believe in ghosts. (Derrida 2013: 40)

The encounter with Pascale unnerves Derrida as it unsettles his sense of time and space: he is 'in a dark room on another continent, in another world, here, now' but this *here* and *now* is interrupted by yet another world and yet another *here* and *now*. 'Here, now, yes, believe me, I believe in ghosts', Pascale says on screen, a ghost returning from the grave repeating the words she said while still alive:

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[47] *Ghost Dance* 1983. 15:55 – 21:07.

I know that the first time Pascale said this, already when she repeated this in my office, already, this spectrality was at work. It was already there, she was already saying this, and she knew, just as we know, that even if she hadn't died in the interval, one day, it would be a dead woman who said, "I am dead," or "I am dead, I know what I'm talking about from where I am …" (Derrida 2013: 40)

The *now* and the sense of immediacy and presence it usually offers is here presented as haunted by both the future and the past, a spectral repetition: *I know that the first time Pascale said this, already when she* repeated *this in my office, already, this spectrality was at work*, Derrida said. *Now … now … now*.

Queer theorist Carolyn Dinshaw repeats her own set of *nows* in her work on spectrality and the queerness of time, saying: "The problem with 'now' is that it's … *now*. Or it's *now*. Or it's right *now*. The denoted moment shifts, it slips, it is deferred, potentially infinitely, along an endless timeline of moments" (Dinshaw 2012: 2. Emphasis in original). The deferral of the *now* disturbs the sense of immediacy and presence that is important to a traditional western understanding of reality and being, making the *now* somewhat unreal:

now has no duration, so how can you talk about it's being, how can it be said to exist at all? … In fact the *now* is never purely there at all: it is a transition, always divided between no longer and not yet, each present *now* is stretched out and spanned by a past *now* and a future *now*. (Dinshaw 2012: 2. Emphasis in original)

When Pascale said that *yes, now I believe in ghosts, yes*, the *now* she evoked was already no longer while also, paradoxically, not yet. The *now* of the living woman was haunted by the *now* of the ghost to come and vice versa.

It is Pascale's unruly *here* and *now* that seems to 'unnerve' Derrida, as he is yet again faced with her delayed response. Rather than suggesting that the ghost be exorcised, however, Derrida suggests an ontology that is sensitive to not only presence and immediacy but also to how what is considered present and immediate depends on the hauntings of the absent and the deferred. This ontology

is a *hauntology*; a rethinking of being that is also intimately connected to an ethics of justice towards the spectral and the unruly *now* of the ghost:

> To be just: beyond the living present in general – and beyond its simple negative reversal. A spectral moment, a moment that no longer belongs to time, if one understands by this word the linking of modalized presents (past present, actual present: "now," future present). We are questioning in this instant, we are asking ourselves about this instant, we are asking ourselves about this instant that is not docile to time, at least to what we call time. (Derrida 2011: xix)

The 'instant', with its etymological relations to immediacy and the now,[48] is questioned in hauntology, and in this questioning lies a call for justice, that is, a relational ethics that reaches 'beyond the living present', 'beyond the instant'. In this sense, the 'beyond' becomes relational itself; like the spectral *now* it is a transition and therefore does not have a presence in and of itself.[49] This 'beyond' may perhaps best be imagined through the hauntings of the ghost, since the ghost is a figure that "has no being in itself, but marks a relation to what is *no longer* or *not yet*", as philosopher Martin Hägglund puts it (quoted in Fisher 2014: 18. Emphasis in original). I would here like to add that the ghost may also mark a relation to that which is at the very border of what is possible to know, not only because it has already been or is yet to come, but because "the ghost or specter is seen to signify precisely that which escapes full cognition or comprehension … the ghost … questions the formation of knowledge itself …" (Del Pilar Blanco and Pereen 2013: 9). The ghost cannot be known by what it is in itself, but only through its relations to something else, whether this something else is yet to come, has already been or never will be. As such, it challenges the very formation of knowledge itself.

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[48] 'Instant' is etymologically related to "now, present, of the moment" as well as "near, imminent, immediate". See: Online Etymology Dictionary: Instant (adj.) and (n.). Link: http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=instant Last accessed: April 2016.
[49] 'Trans(ition)' and 'beyond' are even etymologically connected: 'Trans - ' is a "word-forming element meaning 'across, *beyond*, through, on the other side of, to go *beyond*,'". See: Online Etymology Dictionary: trans -. Emphasis added. Link: http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=trans- Last accessed: April 2016.

In this relationality and in this challenge, I argue, lie the possibility of the ghost as an ethical guide towards a 'beyond' or, in the words of Donna Haraway in 'Promises of Monsters' (1992), an *elsewhere*. The *heres* and *nows* of the spectre are those that can be glimpsed in its unexpected responses, that is, the disruption of immediacy and presence, such as in the encounter between Pascale and Derrida. This is the spectral moment – the unreal *now* – when the ghost responds and for one dizzying instant one gets a taste of a beyond that can never be fully imagined nor contained.

Yet, what does it mean to have something as 'unreal' as a ghost respond? Can something that does not exist in a traditional sense of the word be said to have agency that would allow it to respond – and thereby be included in an ethics of responsibility? And finally, what might the terrains of a ghostly elsewhere look like, and how does one navigate them? In this chapter, I will engage with hauntology as an ethics of ghostly responses by reading two stories of hauntings and curses through one another: *The Curious Case of Smile.jpg* and Jorge Luis Borges' short-story *The Zahir* (2000 [1949]).

2.

"Whom would I burden in turn?" A curse and a promise.

I already told you this story, but as a creepy/copypasta, it bears repeating: According to internet legend, a cursed JPEG circulates online. The image-file shows the picture of a Husky dog with a broad, almost human grin, glowing eyes and a hand reaching out from the void behind it, as if to drag the viewer inside the blood-splattered Polaroid in which the demonic dog lives. Seeing this dog – the real one, that is, and not one of the countless hoaxes[50] – will have "the effect [of] sudden onset temporal lobe epilepsy and acute anxiety".[51] After this immediate effect,

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[50] For more on hoaxes, see Chapter Five: A Trick and Corrections.
[51] *The Curious Case of Smile.jpg*, ca. 2008.

Smile.dog – that is the demon dog's name - will enter the dreams of whoever saw its picture, saying 'spread the word', meaning: *show my picture to someone else, and I will leave you alone*. This is the curse – and the promise - of Smile.dog. Or so Mr. L. tells us.

Mr. L. is the narrator of *The Curious Case of Smile.jpg*, in which he details his explorations into the mystery of the cursed, digital image. During his research, he comes across a woman - Mary E. - who claims to have been exposed to Smile.jpg in the early 1990s. During the 16 years that she has been living with the curse of Smile.jpg, Mary E. has given much thought to the promises made by the spectral dog. She explains that it appears in her dreams every night (*spread the word*, it says), and in a letter written to Mr. L. shortly before she ends her own life, she says:

> I could show it to a stranger, a coworker… I could even show it to Terence [her husband], as much as the idea disgusted me. And what would happen then? Well, if Smile.dog kept its word, I could sleep. Yet, if it lied, what would I do? And who was to say something worse would not come for me if I did as the creature asked? (*The Curious Case of Smile.jpg*, ca. 2008)

Whereas it was an *answer* that reached Derrida across a spectral *here* and *now*, when he encountered Pascale yet again, Mary E. presents a series of *questions* that she pens down while alive, knowing that by the time they are read, they will be the words of a dead woman. The *here* and *now* of the living woman is haunted by the *here* and *now* of the *revenant* and vice versa. Mr. L. is *unnerved* – to refer back to Derrida – by the glimpse of Mary E.'s spectral *here* and *now*, penned while she was alive and repeated from beyond the grave. He asks:

> if Smile.dog came to me in my dreams demanding I spread the word, what would I do? Would I live my life as Mary had, fighting against the urge to give in until I died? Or would I simply spread the word, eager to be put to rest? And if I chose the latter route, how could I do it? Whom would I burden in turn? (*The Curious Case of Smile.jpg*, ca. 2008)

Eventually, someone with the email-address elzahir82@***.com sends Mr. L. the cursed JPEG, and in so doing, evokes yet another *now*, this time the one of 1949, when Borges wrote about a cursed object with the ability to distort reality. Through these multiple *nows*, a future is hinted at: there is a new (re)turn at hand, and this time it moves towards the reader of the creepypasta, as the image of Smile.dog (re)appears at the end of the story, suggesting that the reader is now the one who is cursed. *What will come for you, if you do as the creature asks?* and: *who will you burden in (re)turn?*

The story of *The Curious Case* relies on a sense of uncanny, ghostly agentiality; the monster has the ability to wander from the virtual realms of the world wide web to another kind of virtuality, that is, the unfolding future of the reader where Smile.dog may or may not materialise at some point. Until the promise – or the curse – has become manifest, a realm of im/possibility exists; a terrain of waiting, anticipation and expectation that may be understood as the dizzying, fleeting experience of what Derrida has called "the virtual space of spectrality" (2011: 12). The virtual space of spectrality is not a container, something one may wander through and then extract from again. As in the case of the instant – *we are questioning in this instant, we are asking ourselves about this instant*, Derrida puts it – the virtual space of spectrality is something one is part of and may ask oneself about,[52] but never from a distance, never from a god-eye perspective. It does not pre-exist one's relation to it, but becomes in transitions between *nows*.

Since hauntology aims to take seriously such spaces of spectrality, it may be understood as engaging with "*the agency of the virtual*, with the spectre understood not as anything supernatural, but as that which acts without (physically) existing" (Fisher 2014: 18. Emphasis in original). Understanding the virtual as an agential force means deconstructing what an agent might be - not least an ethical agent, who, in a western context, is traditionally imagined as human.

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[52] This 'asking oneself' will always, however, be an 'asking the ghosts' as well. I discuss this in Chapter Four: The Smile and Chapter Five: A Trick.

3.

Virtue, virtuality and virtue ethics.

In 'The Promises of Monsters' (1992), which was published a year before *Spectres de Marx* (1993), Haraway engages with the question of the virtual,[53] its capabilities for agency as well as its unsteady ontology and uneasy relation with 'real(ity)'. She connects this discussion to so-called 'virtual reality', saying:

> The virtual seems to be the counterfeit of the real; the virtual has effects by seeming, not being. Perhaps that is why "virtue" is still given in dictionaries to refer to women's chastity, which must always remain doubtful in patriarchal optical law. But then, "virtue" used to mean manly spirit and valor too, and God even named an order of angels the Virtues, though they were of only middling rank. Still, no matter how big the effects of the virtual are, they seem somehow to lack a proper ontology. Angels, manly valor, and women's chastity certainly constitute, at best, a virtual image from the point of view of late twentieth-century "postmoderns." For them, the virtual is precisely not the real; that's why "postmoderns" *like* "virtual reality." It seems transgressive. Yet, I can't forget that an obsolete meaning of "virtual" was having virtue, i.e., the inherent power to produce effects. "Virtu," after all, is excellence or merit, and it is still a common meaning of virtue to refer to having efficacy. The "virtue" of something is its "capacity." The virtue of (some) food is that it nourishes the body. Virtual space *seems* to be the negation of real space; the domains of SF *seem* the negation of earthly regions. But perhaps this negation is the real illusion. (Haraway 1992: 324 - 325. Emphasis in original)

Haraway is here looking to map out an ontology of the virtual that takes into consideration its effects and agency. I will argue that such an ontology may be a

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[53] Studies on the virtual is a vast interdisciplinary field. For this text, however, I have chosen to focus solely on the works of Donna Haraway and Charles Ess.

hauntology, but first I would like to begin elsewhere, that is, with some of the theories of media ethicist Charles Ess. Within contemporary Scandinavian media studies, Ess is a well-known scholar, affiliated with both the University of Oslo, Norway, and Aarhus University, Denmark. While writing this text, it was more often than not his work that colleagues would recommend to me, considering how his expertise lies in the interconnections between digital technologies and ethics. Ess, like Haraway, engages with virtue, ethics and virtual reality, yet from a very different – and, I will argue, problematic – position, which magnifies some of the reasons why rethinking the agency of the non-human and the non-existent is an important, ethical task.

Ess argues for the application of traditional, western virtue ethics to online encounters. In this sense, he engages with the aspect of *virtu* that Haraway describes as meaning 'excellence' or 'merit', as well as something that has the capacity to act and create effects. Ess himself explains that:

> '[v]irtue' (*arête* – "excellence") refers to the qualities or capacities (e.g., patience, perseverance – indeed, reason itself) seen to contribute to our living the good life in its broadest sense, i.e., a life of individual well-being … in harmony with the larger community. The central insight of virtue ethics is that these capacities … are not given but acquired, and only through a long and often difficult *practice* of cultivating these abilities (Ess 2010: 107. Emphasis in original)

In this sense, virtue ethics becomes a question of morality, that is, ethics that operates according to the establishing of what is good and bad, right and wrong, as well as the expectation that the individual educates himself in the matters of the rights and duties extended to him. This is a fairly common understanding of ethics within a western context, and one that Derrida refers to as 'law' rather than 'justice', as I will discuss later in this chapter.

Ess argues that virtue ethics offers the possibility for the human subject to become *excellent* – that is, an ethical actor - through a careful cultivation of the self. It is the task of the ethical subject to make difficult but *right* choices through

the use of reason and by learning from his mistakes. This is at the core of *phroneisis*, that is, "a practical judgment that is able to discern the right choice (or, sometimes, choices) among the possibilities before us" (Ess 2009: 208). *Phroneisis*, Ess writes, is necessary when surfing the world wide web. Indeed, he argues that since the virtues of virtue ethics – which include understanding and forgiveness along with patience, perseverance and reason mentioned above - are universally human, they can be applied within a highly international context, such as the web. As he puts it: "these virtues are necessary conditions to a cross-cultural communication that allows us to know one another not only as the same but also as radically and irreducibly different from ourselves" (2009: 115). He continues, saying: "when Others recognize in us this sort of humility – in contrast with a naïve ethnocentrism that runs the risk of imperialism – they are far more likely to practice the virtues of patience, understanding, and forgiveness when we do make the mistakes inevitable in crossing cultures" (2009: 112).

Ess aims to establish a workable, applicable ethical code that can be extended to the users of the internet and consulted as a moral compass online. He does so through the structuring metaphor of the web as 'difficult seas' that must be steered by an excellent steersman: the cybernetes. "Plato's *cybernetes* – the ship's pilot – exemplifies … a relational, embodied self whose knowledge, *feeling*, and *judgments* about how to navigate in difficult seas [is] a primary metaphor for *phroneisis* and its central role in our ethical lives" (Ess 2010: 111. Emphasis in original). Here, the ethical subject becomes a subject who – through his capabilities and development of excellence – is mostly in control of the terrains he travels, this 'difficult sea'. Furthermore, while travelling, the cybernetes stays unitary and grounded, thereby offering an 'antidote' to what Ess argues is the internet's tendency to distribute the self across various sites, creating a 'smeared out self' (2010: 111). In order for such a distributed self to work, Ess writes, it needs to be anchored in a sense of embodiment. Strangely enough, he points to Haraway as an example of a thinker who neglects the body in her engagement with cyberspace and virtuality. Indeed, Ess positions Haraway's article 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science,

Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century' (1991 [1985]) as an example of the 1990s' postmodern negation of embodiment, saying: "this contempt for the body *qua* meat serves as the occasion for Donna Haraway's highly influential Cyborg Manifesto (1990), in which she argued that women as bodiless in cyberspace would no longer be subject to the male gaze, much less physical violence" (Ess 2010: 109. Emphasis in original). This conclusion, I argue, is based on a misreading of Haraway's work, which is known for its critical engagement with rethinking and reimagining bodies and materiality in times of advanced tele- and bio-technologies. This is a rethinking and reimagining that does not do away with materiality and embodiment, but argues that traditional western notions of bodies and boundaries are no longer creative and sufficient enough to account for not least women's embodied, lived experiences.

I bring this critique of Ess' reading of Haraway up here, since Ess claims that there is an inherent respect for otherness and difference in his updated version of virtue ethics. I disagree with this, as I show later in this chapter, and I find that Ess' somewhat nonchalant dismissal of Haraway's text indicates a lack of responsibility towards the feminist academic tradition he attempts to engage with. Indeed, Ess does not give his readers any indications as to how he arrived at his conclusions, as he does not quote from Haraway's text, and he even gets the year of publication wrong. This undermines his chronology, which places Haraway's work in the 1990s – and therefore as part of a 90's 'contempt for the body' – whereas the text was originally published in 1985. As such, I argue that Ess merely uses Haraway's text for the sake of an argument rather than staying open to how the text might actually contradict and disturb his understanding of feminist theory and ethics. This, I argue, is an example of an irresponsible (or *response*less) and therefore unethical reading as active rewriting.

Ess' engagement with virtue ethics is an example of a more traditional, western thinking regarding ethics and the ethical subject. Returning to *The Curious Case*, I would like to stay a little longer with this way of imagining an ethical subject, since it forms part of a tradition that is critiqued by both Haraway and Derrida. I will

also use this traditional understanding of ethics as a point of departure for reading as active rewriting later in this chapter.

4.

Decorum, propriety, wholeness. Responding to a curse.

Mary E. sends a warning to Mr. L.: "stop while you are still whole",[54] she writes, indicating that the encounter with the spectral demon dog may shatter a unitary sense of self.[55] She had initially planned to show the JPEG to Mr. L., thereby passing the curse on to him, yet at the very last moment she decided against it. In her letter, Mary E. apologizes to Mr. L., saying that she should "have handled the situation more decorously".[56] 'Decorous'[57] is etymologically related to 'proper',[58] which is something "own, particular; exact, neat, fitting … belonging or pertaining to oneself; individual; intrinsic", as well as "by the rules, correct, appropriate, acceptable". Furthermore, 'proper' is related to 'excellent', not least through a sense of capability, since 'proper' means "adapted to some purpose, fit, apt; commendable, *excellent*" (emphasis added).[59] Companionship with the spectral Smile.dog disturbs such a sense of unity and wholeness, excellence and capability. This may be because "[t]he monster … is a failure to be a proper being", as posthumanist theorist Patricia McCormack puts it (quoted in Mittman 2013: 81),

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[54] *The Curious Case of Smile.jpg*, ca. 2008.

[55] I will return to this 'unitary sense of self' in my discussion of anxiety in Chapter Three: The Void. This will, however, be in connection with *Welcome to Night Vale* and the story of Emily and Nathan, not *The Curious Case of Smile.jpg*.

[56] *The Curious Case of Smile.jpg*, ca. 2008.

[57] Online Etymology Dictionary: decorous (adj.). Link: http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=decorous&allowed_in_frame=0 Last accessed: April 2016.

[58] Online Etymology Dictionary: proper (adj.). Link: http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=proper Last accessed: April 2016.

[59] Online Etymology Dictionary: proper (adj.). Link: http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=proper Last Accessed: April 2016.

returning us yet again to the failings and wandering of the monster, discussed in the previous chapter. Smile.dog's curse is indeed uncontainable, wandering and improper as it breaches boundaries between offline and online, self and other, past and future – as well as between narratives, insofar as *The Curious Case* is haunted by yet another spectre, who seems to speak through Mary E.: the spectre of Teodelina Villar, another woman who may or may not have committed suicide while in the company of ghosts. She will return later.

Mary E.'s concerns regarding wholeness and – through the route of decorum – the 'proper', places her within a traditional western understanding of the ethical self. This is a self that is imagined as unitary, bounded and whole through its rejection of that which is multiple, boundless and fragmented. Feminist theorist Julia Kristeva describes this 'proper' human subject through the figure of the self's 'clean and proper body' (Shildrick 2002: 53-54). The clean and proper body expresses a self that is contained and bounded and through this containment and boundedness it becomes capable - or *excellent*, as excellence refers to the proper and to virtue as the ability to produce effects – of encountering other subjects while travelling a world imagined as a container for bounded entities. Within such an imaginary, movement primarily works according to linear causality, at least when it comes to non-human agents.

Explaining what is often referred to as a Newtonian imaginary[60] of reality, feminist new materialists Diana Coole and Samantha Frost write:

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[60] As a layperson, I refer to a Newtonian imaginary rather than Newton's own texts. In other words, I am referring to a cultural imaginary of a Newtonian world, which may indeed not always be fair to Newton's actual work. As Michelle M. Wright puts it: "'Newtonian spacetime' is *not* equivalent to Newton's theories but rather is how philosophy and political science – as well as nearly all Western discourses, really, academic and lay – have (mis)translated Newton's concept of a linear spacetime or progress narrative" (Wright 2015: 15. Emphasis in original). With the concept of a Newtonian imaginary, rather than Newtonian spacetime, I want to indicate that I am working on the basis of a general cultural imaginary of the workings of the physical world. An imaginary that – fairly and unfairly – is being referred back to the work done by Newton. A more detailed discussion of the popular (mis)understanding of Newton's work would be interesting, but not doable within the scope of this text.

[m]aterial objects are identifiably discrete; they move only upon an encounter with an external force or agent, and they do so according to a linear logic of cause and effect. It seems intuitively congruent with what common sense tells us is the "real" material world of solid, bounded objects that occupy space and whose movements or behaviors are predictable, controllable, and replicable because they obey fundamental and invariable laws of motion. (Coole and Frost 2010: 7-8)

The linear causality of the so-called 'natural' world of material reality makes it a world of 'reactions'. Within a traditional western humanist imaginary, reaction is the movement and agency afforded non-human animals and so-called natural matter. These are the entities that need to have movement transferred via impact. In other words, they need an external cause for there to be an effect, and the effect will follow mechanical and predictable patterns, dictated by the laws of causality. Non-human creatures are therefore not capable of excellence, in the sense of the production of effects on their own initiative and through the application of *phroneisis*, as Ess might have put it. If they were, they would be able to *respond* rather than *react*, but that is the prerogative of the rational human subject. Indeed, the human subject is considered exceptional not just for walking upright - as discussed in Chapter One - but also for his capability for reason and rational deductions, as exemplified in Ess' figure of the rational cybernetes, the captain who steers his ship across difficult waters based on the navigational tool of *phroneisis*.

The exceptional, intelligent and *proper* human subject plays a prominent role within traditional western morality, where self and other are separate entities that pre-exist their relation, bounded creatures that inhabit the world according to an ontology of the whole, proper and distinct. "[B]oth the self and the corresponding other should be fully independent, closed and secure in his or her integrity, and invulnerable to extraneous influences", Margrit Shildrick writes in her discussion of the convention:

> In consequence the *proper relation* between the two is characterised as one
> between equal and autonomous agents whose coming together is negotiated
> through implicit contract – a setting out of rights and duties for example – into
> which each may freely enter without compromising their own independence. To
> be a subject in a world of others, even to attain full personhood, devolves, then,
> on maintaining the interval of distinction. (Shildrick 2009: 20. Emphasis added)

An improper creature such as Smile.dog does not respect the interval of distinction. Instead, it troubles the divide between self and other that is crucial to an ethics in which the moral agent needs to be bounded and separate from the individuals and objects he engages with. It is through this boundedness that the human subject may distinguish himself from the so-called natural world – a world of mechanical causality and therefore movement based on *reaction*– and thereby be capable of response, that is, acting based on reason and a sense of distanced objectivity. This is "a morality of principles and rules that speaks to a clear-cut set of binaries setting out the good and the evil, the self and the other, normal and abnormal, the permissible and the prohibited" (Shildrick 2002: 3). A contagious creature such as Smile.dog disturbs these distinctions.

5.

Response as interruption.

The proper moral human subject is – according to traditional western thought – duty-bound to strive towards excellence as a question of performing 'fitting', useful agency. Herein lies the ability to respond by causing certain effects through the application of *phroneisis*, and this is why only human beings can be full ethical agents within an ethics of responsibility that is based on a moral-codex of the excellent as well as the distinction between the 'natural world' on the one hand and human beings on the other.

The distinction between 'culture' and 'nature, 'human' and 'animal', 'response' and 'reaction' has been heavily criticised, not least within a poststructuralist and posthumanist tradition. Arguing from the standpoint that all things *are* because of the absences that haunt them, Derrida has written extensively on how the traditional human subject of knowledge can only be said to *be*, since it orients itself away from all that which it thinks that it *is not*. As such, the humanist subject materialises through series of exclusions, eventually taking on a more and more narrow shape: this subject is – as has been pointed out through decades by feminist thinkers - white, male and able-bodied. This creates groups of constitutive others that fail at being fully human and are therefore somewhat excluded from an ethics of responsibility.

To Derrida, as well as Haraway, the question is not how to extend the right to become a moral subject to those who are currently on the margins. Instead, they argue for a rethinking and reimagining of what an ethical subject as well as ethical agency might be. In other words, to someone like Haraway, response is not about reason and judgement, but about "a generative interruption" (2008: 20). This is what makes me refer to Derrida's encounter with the spectre of Ogier as a response, since the sudden appearance of the ghost forms an unnerving interruption. This interruption consists partly in a brief glimpse of a different *here* and *now*, a haunted terrain. As such, the spectre caused an effect, it made something appear, and in so doing, it opened up to something unknown, other and different. This is where I find that Ess' virtue ethics falls short. In his examples of encounters between self and other, cybernetes and the difficult waters, otherness is never truly strange, since the encounters take place only between human beings, and human beings – he argues – share universal, recognizable values. It is therefore up to the excellent cybernetes to act according to a moral codex that will spark a predictable and desired reaction in his other. As quoted earlier: *when Others recognize in us this sort of humility … they are far more likely to practice the virtues of patience, understanding, and forgiveness when we do make the mistakes inevitable in crossing cultures*. I argue that an ethics that calculates the outcomes

of an encounter and aims to control it is not so much open to a *response* as seeking a *reaction*, that is, a mechanical causality where the effect (the desired action) is the end-result of a cause (the conduct according to the codex of morality). The ethics of otherness suggested by Ess is thus very much an ethics based on predictability and control, which closes down the horizon of the unexpected and undecidable. This also closes down the possibility for the im/possible, that is, the arrival of that which is so strange and so other that it cannot be predicted.

In the case of *Smile.jpg*, unpredictability and strangeness is imagined through the virtual and generative nature of the promise of a monster: "And what if something worse would come for me, if I did as the creature asked?" Mary E. wrote, knowing only that the improper nature of the monster makes it impossible to know in advance. Whereas Ess suggested a cultivated self that strives for excellence, the self in a responsive encounter with something as improper as a virtual demon dog runs a risk; she cannot manipulate the spectre to do something specific, since the spectre does not follow a moral compass. Instead, it disrupts any sense of certainty by offering glimpses of the arrival of a *something* from out of *nothing*.[61] I suggest that the response of Smile.dog may well be found in the effects it produces, whether this is acute anxiety - or the expectation of something yet to come.

6.

Glimpses of monsters. An improper ontology of the virtual.

 "It is true that some of us have never glimpsed a monster," Jeffrey Cohen writes. "Yet none of us have beheld time, or oxygen, or the wind. We vividly perceive their effects, and from this evidence we postulate agency and cause. The effects of the monster are undeniable" (quoted in Mittman 2013: 6). Jeffrey Weinstock agrees, saying: "The recurring concern underlying contemporary monster narratives is that,

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[61] I will discuss this emergence of a *something* out of *nothing* in Chapter Three: The Void.

through a sort of retroactive causality, we now can only determine the monster's presence through its effects" (quoted in Mittman 2013: 6). In other words, the monster can only be experienced through its effects, making its presence a question of constant deferrals. In Derrida's encounter with the spectre of Ogier, the effect is the unnerving experience of a temporary disruption of time and space. In the case of Smile.dog, the effect that one is promised is acute anxiety. Whether this acute anxiety happens or not, the unexpected image of Smile.dog at the end of the story asks that the reader – if only for the most fleeting of seconds – searches for that trace of anxiety. The *here* and *now* of the creepypasta has been opened to her, the terrain of phantoms *beyond* glimpsed for the briefest of moments. This disturbance may well be an unlikely response in the form of an interruption, that is, a certain sense of agency, but not one remotely similar to Ess' travelling cybernetes, who follows virtue as a compass. Instead, this agency may be understood through the 'improper' ontology of the virtual - "no matter how big the effects of the virtual are, they seem somehow to lack a proper ontology", Haraway wrote (1992: 325. Emphasis added). I am not so much interested in attempting to provide the virtual with a *proper* ontology, but will instead attempt to arrive at something decidedly improper and lacking in decorum; a hauntology of boundary-crossing monsters that includes a sense of justice towards *now*-shattering spectral responses.

According to Haraway, it is the 'inherent power to produce effects' that first of all helps define the virtual. In this way, she stays with the troubling ontology of the virtual, where 'the virtual has effects by seeming, not being', as she puts it. There is a sense of the unreal, the trick and the hoax about the virtual as it is often contrasted to the real,[62] the immediate and the authentic. Yet, Haraway argues, merely labelling the virtual as a 'negation of real space' may be the illusion. The virtual exists and acts, but not in a traditional sense of these words or according to morality and the judgment of *phroneisis*. Instead, the virtual is relational; like the ghost, it first of all marks a relation and becomes visible in the effects caused. As

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[62] For more on tricks and hoaxes, see Chapter Five: A Trick and Corrections.

such, it cannot *be* merely in itself, but perhaps more as a diffracted pattern: "A diffraction pattern does not map where differences appear, but maps where the *effects* of difference appear", Haraway explains (1992: 300. Emphasis in original). In this sense, difference is agential as well as virtual in its creation of effects.

Haraway's engagement with the effects of the virtual as a question of difference at work is somewhat reminiscent of Derrida's non-concept *différance*. As mentioned in the introduction, *différance* is a wordplay that derives from the French *différer*, which can mean to delay or postpone, as well as to differ/be different. Derrida argued that since the *a* cannot be heard when the word is pronounced, it signals something excessive at work in the spoken, something *different* as well as a general movement within being. Being, according to Derrida, is not static, but it also does not move according to intent and linear causality. Instead, the movement within being may perhaps be imagined as the haunting of a ghost; what I imagine as the silent dance on the absent present feet of monsters such as Smile.dog. This haunting is not agency in the traditional sense of the word – for example in the figure of the cybernetes who expertly steers difficult waters according to rational judgment – but the workings of the uncanny subject-less and object-less agency of Freud's *es spukt*:

> Its translation always fails, unfortunately, to render the link between the impersonality or the quasi-anonymity of an operation [*spuken*] without act, without real subject or object, and the production of a figure, that of the *revenant* [*der Spuk*]: not simply 'it spooks,' as we just ventured to translate, but 'it returns,' 'it ghosts,' 'it specters.' (Derrida 2011: 166. Emphasis in original)

Es spukt is more easily translated into my native Danish - *det spøger* – which may well be why the term appeals to me. Apart from translating into 'it spooks' and 'it ghosts', as Derrida points out, *det spøger* also relates to 'it jokes', 'it tricks', 'it hoaxes', which refers back to Haraway's discussion of the virtual as something concerning that which 'seems' or even the 'counterfeit'. *Es spukt*, I argue, may therefore be understood to move according to the logics of the virtual, as described

by Haraway. The virtual '*spukt*' – 'tricks', 'hoaxes' and 'jokes' - through its subject-less agency. Like the silent 'a' in *différance*, it suggests a haunting absence in presence, a sense of movement that is outside of time and space and therefore opens up towards a *beyond*, that is, spaces of spectrality that do not exist merely in and for themselves, but as part of the world as an open system.

7.

The world as an open, spooky system.

In her work on deconstruction and new materialism, feminist philosopher Vicki Kirby engages with the poststructuralist notion of open systems through a critique of the traditional nature/culture divide. New materialism, within a feminist framework, is the critique of the Newtonian imaginary and the world as mechanical and non-responsive. Instead, most feminist new materialists suggest a Spinoza-inspired take on matter as vital, as inherently agential and capable of movement that is not predictable according to traditional causality.

Whereas many feminist theorists working on new materialism engage with a re-imagining of matter through the natural sciences, Kirby brings deconstruction to the forefront.[63] She argues for an ontology based on the world as an open, 'spooky' system,[64] saying:

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[63] This is an interesting move, since it breaks with the popular narrative of new materialism 'finally' bringing the body and materiality back after the 1990s' supposed over-focus on the immateriality of discourse and text (Coole and Frost 2010) – the same critique that Ess raises in connection with Haraway's 'A Cyborg Manifesto'. The discussion regarding the (supposed) differences between some branches of poststructuralist feminist theory and feminist new materialisms is, however, not one I will be going into detail with here, since it falls outside the scope of this text.

[64] The 'spooky' system is a reference to Albert Einstein, who wrote of 'action-at-a-distance', that is, the transference of movement without obvious touching, as 'spooky action at a distance'. This formed part of Einstein's discussion of various ether-theories.

By taking Derrida's notion of an "open system" to its logical conclusion, the senses of particularism – whether individual subjects, objects, words, methodologies, or even systems – lose their identifying outlines as entities or atomic individuations that communicate, or relate to each other, with causal effect … When Derrida reminds his audience that deconstruction's implications could not be confined to philosophy any more than they could be restricted between the covers of a book, perhaps the most provocative consequence of such clarifications is that the reader/writer of this "general text" is necessarily dispersed – it is not located, at least not in any classical sense, in a human agent. Within this "open system" whose only constant is mutation/writing, the same questions that are confronted in the physical sciences about determination, agency, causality, space-time involvement, and "spooky" entanglement, are all operative. (Kirby 2011: 2-3)

The ontology of the open system suggested by Derrida and discussed by Kirby, is one that comes to be not through the will of a human agent, but the mutations/writings of impersonal forces. Here, the writer is not necessarily human, but agential matter in all forms, suggesting that human beings, too, are the creations – the mutations – formed by constantly transforming systems writing and rewriting themselves.

Kirby's aim is to deconstruct the traditional western nature/culture divide, in which culture inscribes itself upon passive matter returning us to the question of responses and reactions: culture responds to the reactions of nature, shaping and forming natural matter according to the logics of science, art and technology, whereas natural matter – nature – is never understood to respond to the actions of culture and its cultivated inhabitants. To Kirby, however, nature and culture cannot be separated, nor can nature be understood to be a construct of the agencies of culture. Instead, she asks: "what if culture was really nature all along?" (2011: 68). That is, an open system of mutating, creating and transformative connections. My main concern here is not so much the rich and highly important feminist critique of the nature/culture divide, but rather how this debate is part of a deconstruction and rethinking of an ontology of the world as well as of ethical

agency. Agency, as in the production of effects, is here imagined not as the prerogative of an excellent, human subject, who navigates according to a moral compass, but as the production of effects by that which is not a subject nor an object but something so strange that it can never be fully understood. Something like *es spukt*, imagined through the workings of the monstrous *arrivant*.

8.

A risky ethics of hospitality towards the monstrous *arrivant*

The monstrous *arrivant* is a figure of the traveling other that never arrives but whose effect is felt nonetheless. *And who was to say something worse would not come for me if I did as the creature asked?* Mary E. writes, looking towards a beyond the instant that she cannot possibly decipher. It is moving towards her nonetheless, and she towards it, and all the while the monster has already arrived, haunting her dreams. This is the paradox of the *arrivant* as it moves through the open, haunted system of reality: it is never solely arriving from the outside. As a constitutive other, it also arrives from within, deconstructing the very threshold that the subject wishes to establish between self and other. *Stop while you are still whole*, Mary E. warns Mr. L., but – as discussed in the previous chapter - no subject is ever fully whole. Instead it *is* through relationality, not least towards its many absent others. The ethical challenge, Derrida argues, is to welcome the monstrous *arrivant* – this figure of undecidability - and to live in its company without asking that it changes or even that it gives its name. Whereas Ess' virtue ethics, for example, revolves around the establishing of an excellent self who extends hospitality as a gesture of sameness (we can all live together because we follow the same, basic rules), the self is here imagined as relational, its very threshold transforming in the encounter with the other:

as [Derrida] puts it in *Aporias*, the unexpected *arrivant* 'effects the very experience of the threshold' … Rather than there being a simple crossing from one defined and identifiable location to another, the boundary itself is displaced … it is the at-homeness with oneself that cannot be taken for granted … One must welcome the unknown other, then, both in the absence of any foreknowledge that would establish either identity of, or identity with, and in the context of radical doubt as to one's own identity. (Shildrick 2002: 130)

Like the monster from Cohen's and Weinstock's writing, the *arrivant* has an *effect* as it alters the 'very experience of the threshold' of the self, disturbing any sense of static identity. The experience of a calm 'at-homeness' is disrupted as the 'home' – the self's experience of being a bounded and contained unity – is haunted by the other, who is never as distant and strange as the self likes to think. Indeed, the subject's experience of itself as a self is one of the very effects of this constantly deferred monster.

The figure of the monstrous *arrivant* opens up to an ethical challenge as to how one may greet the unexpected other. Whereas Marx would most likely have suggested a conjuring away of the *arrivant* by asking that it either materialises or disperses, Derrida, however, argues that one should show it *absolute hospitality*. Absolute hospitality differs from *general hospitality*, which is hospitality according to law and morality. This is a sense of hospitality shown by Ess' cybernetes, for example, who lives and acts according to principles of human virtues and *proper* – returning us to the etymologies of *decorum*, *excellence* and *wholeness* - relations. According to Derrida, general hospitality is only possible in the encounter with the *foreigner*, not the *other*. There is a small, yet significant difference between the two: whereas the other is so strange, so monstrous that it can never have a name, nor a language and therefore no means with which to become a subject before the law, the foreigner does have these possibilities (Derrida 2000: 25). The foreigner is expected to assimilate in order to be able to ask for hospitality, meaning that the foreigner must learn a new language, the language of the host:

That is where the question of hospitality begins: must we ask the foreigner to

understand us, to speak our language, in all the sense of this term, in all its

possible extensions, before being able and so as to be able to welcome him into

our country? If he was already speaking our language, with all that that implies,

if we already shared everything that is shared with a language, would the

foreigner still be a foreigner and could we speak of asylum or hospitality in regard

to him? (Derrida 2000: 15+17)

The paradox of hospitality according to the law is that the foreigner is expected to not be *too* foreign. A domestication[65] process is set in motion in order for the foreigner to assimilate to a point where there may, perhaps, not be any hospitality at stake at all; the foreigner has become similar to the host and no longer a stranger to whom one extends hospitality. General hospitality, the hospitality of the juridical and moral system, is thus one of 'rights' and 'duties' (Derrida 2000: 25). This seems to yet again move us into the waters of the autonomous, rational subject of traditional western humanism, as well as the ethics of Ess' cybernetes; a moral ethics of obligations towards a human ideal of excellence and wholeness, which does not respect the foundational otherness of the stranger, but may be able to engage with the foreigner, whose name and speech opens up towards the possibility of a predictable reaction.

Whereas general hospitality is the moral contract extended to the foreigner by the law, absolute hospitality is about impossible justice that is yet to come. According to Derrida, absolute hospitality

should break with the law of hospitality as right or duty, with the "pact" of

hospitality … absolute hospitality requires that I open up my home and that I give

… to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other, and that I *give place* to them,

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[65] 'Domestication' is a concept used by Derrida to describe how the otherness of a monster is assimilated. The domesticated monster may be offered a general hospitality – the hospitality extended to the foreigner – yet it has lost the undecidability that made it monstrous to begin with. In other words, domestication merely works to defer the monster, since undecidability can never be done away with. See Derrida 2000 and Shildrick 2002, 2009.

that I let them come, that I let them arrive, and take place in the place I offer
them, without asking them either reciprocity (entering into a pact) or even their
names. The law of absolute hospitality commands a break with hospitality by
right, with law or justice as rights. (Derrida 2000: 25. Emphasis in original)

Absolute hospitality is "the risky ethics of uncertainty" (Shildrick 2002: 132) that
extends itself to the unknown and unpredictable and makes space within for the
other. Whereas law consists of morals, pacts and contracts, which demand that one
speaks and understands the language with which they are written, an ethics of
justice is about unconditional, absolute hospitality towards the difference of the
other. This is what makes it risky; as the other arrives, the threshold shifts and the
subject is asked to make space for the other, disturbing the 'at-homeness' by
making the home uncanny;[66] something is at work in the haunted subject, *es spukt*,
such that it acts without being a subject, without being an object, without moving
according to a linear itinerary of arrival and departure. Instead of this linearity, one
must make space for the monstrous *arrivant* prior to its arrival, and in this making
space for it feel its effect, in spite of it not having arrived and not being *there* yet,
immediate and present. There is no promise of either good or bad, benign or evil in
this effect of the *arrivant*, only the impact of difference as it creates a virtual terrain,
a space of spectres that is neither fully inside nor outside, in this *now*, in past *now*s
or in *now*s to come.[67]

The workings of the monstrous *arrivant* are, I argue, what opens up that
dizzying glimpse of something else, another *here* and *now*. These haunting *here*s
and *now*s are difficult to write about and imagine since they need to be undecidable
and in movement in order not to be domesticated. Yet, reading Derrida's ethics of
justice to come through Haraway's understanding of theory-writing as a mapping
exercise that takes unlikely figures as guides may be a way to approach the figure

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[66] This is somewhat more clear in Freud's original German *unheimlich* (un-homely).
[67] For more on the ethics of making space for the other in advance of its arrival, see
Chapter Four: The Smile. Here, I discuss the question of mourning the death of the loved
other yet to die, forming a crypt for her within.

of the monstrous *arrivant* without asking that it be only one thing. Reading Haraway and Derrida through one another, I will here suggest a reading and slight rewriting of *The Curious Case of Smile.jpg*, as it magnifies the interconnecting and transgressive character of the web and its monsters. Yet, instead of Haraway's guide - Lisa Foo in *Press Enter* - I will be following Smile.dog; a creature whose *here* and *now* is one of a past story as well as a future one, in which a virtual landscape takes form as a curse and a promise. "There is no safe place here", Haraway writes about the virtual terrains of Foo's web. "[T]here are, however, many maps of possibility" (Haraway 1992: 326). Smile.dog – in the guise of the Zahir, a cursed astrolabe and compass – offers itself as a navigator and companion in such a mapping exercise of im/possibilities, risk and uncertainty.

9.
to: jml@**.com**
from: elzahir82@**.com**

"[I]f Smile.dog kept its word, I could sleep. Yet, if it lied, what would I do? And who was to say something worse would not come for me if I did as the creature asked?" Mary E. wrote while she was alive, her question repeated to us from beyond the grave. The *now* of the living mingles with the *now* of the *revenant*, both of these *now*s opening up to the next one, the one that is yet to come: what would happen, if you did as the creature asked? The reader still does not know. Smile.dog's promise is as undecidable and unknowable as it ever was, and the spaces of possibility that it opens are risky and multiple. "[A] promise must promise to be kept, that is, not to remain 'spiritual' or 'abstract,' but to produce events, new effective forms of action …" (2011: 111-112), Derrida writes. These effects that the promise promises open up a virtual space of the yet-to-come, something beyond this instant; as in the case of Ogier saying *now I believe in ghosts*, the spectrality of the now is at work. The now of the materialised promise is evoked in the now in

which the promise is made, and as any 'virtue', it produces an effect and sets out a course for the subject to follow even before its own materialisation. The promise of Smile.dog (*spread the word*, which continues on absent feet to suggest the unspoken: *and I'll leave you alone*) seems to have a similar effect; it promises to produce anxiety, yes, but even in the absence of anxiety, something else is evoked in the shape of a tense waiting and wondering about what might come instead. Will it come *now*? or maybe NOW?

In *The Curious Case*, the curse of Smile.dog opens up to an arrival of something – a *now* yet to come – yet it does so by conjuring forth a *now* of the past. In this sense, there is a spectral response within *The Curious Case* that disturbs the story while also making it possible. This response is partly found in the email address of the person who finally passes on Smile.jpg to Mr. L.:

> To:jml@****.com
> From:elzahir82@****.com
> Subj: smile
> Hello
> I found your e-mail address thru a mailing list your profile said you are interested in smiledog. I have saw it it is not as bad as every one says I have sent it to you here. Just spreading the word.
> ☺
> (*The Curious Case of Smile.jpg*, ca. 2008)

The Zahir, originally *El Zahir*, is a humorous short story by Jorge Luis Borges, first published in 1949. Not unlike *The Curious Case*, *The Zahir* is told from a first person perspective, describing a man who searches for the truth about an elusive, cursed object. Both stories play on a sense of authenticity: Mr. L. presents his tale as a true story about academic and artistic research, and *The Zahir* is told as the memories of someone called Borges, who admits that "I am not the man I was then, but I am still able to recall, and perhaps recount, what happened. I am still, albeit partially, Borges" (Borges 2000: 79). I am not, however, primarily interested in the figure of

Borges. Instead, I would like to engage with Teodelina Villar; a woman who, not unlike Mary E., dies under strange circumstances and in so doing, makes the story of *The Zahir* possible at all.

As already mentioned, Mary E. commits suicide, leaving behind a note that sets out to explain while simultaneously veiling what might be going on in *The Curious Case*. Something quite similar happens to Lisa Foo, Haraway's guide from the science fiction short-story *Press Enter*. Foo, Haraway explains, goes deep into the web that she is exploring, and is later found dead, apparently by suicide, a farewell note printed on her t-shirt, her body ruined. To Haraway, the death of Foo is inexcusable and sparks the necessity of reading as rewriting:

> Lisa Foo should not have been killed that way. It really is not alright … that excessive destruction of her body, that total undoing of her being … provokes the necessity of active rewriting as reading. I cannot read this story without rewriting it … The point of the differential/oppositional rewriting is not to make the story come out "right," whatever that would be. The point is to rearticulate the figure of Lisa Foo to unsettle the closed logics of a deadly racist misogyny. Articulation must remain open, its densities accessible to action and intervention. When the system of connections closes in on itself, when symbolic action becomes perfect, the world is frozen in a dance of death. The cosmos is finished, and it is One … generous suspicion is foreclosed. To "press enter" is, in that world, a terrible mistake … The whole argument of "The Promises of Monsters" has been that to "press enter" is not a fatal error, but an inescapable possibility for changing maps of the world, for building new collectives out of what is not quite a plethora of human and unhuman actors … It's not a "happy ending" we need, but a non-ending … The System is not closed; the sacred image of the same is not coming. The world is not full. (Haraway 1992: 327)

Moved by an experience of injustice – what I read as a lack of generosity and openness towards the unknown, that is, a lack of hospitality - Haraway rereads and rewrites the story of Foo, opening up a system that has otherwise closed in on itself. Though never referring to this as an engagement with the world as an open system,

this is how I read her rewriting and rereading; the world as not one, not closed and not full. In other words, this is the world of Richardson's 'failed' writing, where world and word never fully merge but move one another through this failure, through wandering and going astray – as well as in dance. This dance must not freeze in a dance of death, Haraway writes, but it may be imagined through her metaphor of the dance of relating. Or maybe both? Can the dance of relating be a *danse macabre*?

When it comes to Foo, Mary E. and Teodelina Villar death does not, indeed, seem a standstill[68] but yet another point of connection across *here*s and *now*s. In the tale of *The Curious Case*, at least, death seems a connecting point between two women from two different stories that nonetheless overlap through the virtual space of a curse. Both die in order for the story to take place: it is necessary for Villar to die, in order to spark Borges' travel towards self-discovery; and it is necessary for Mary E. to die, in order for us – the creepypasta-readers and Mr. L. – to read her suicide note. Both women are portrayed as overly engaged with issues of propriety and decorum, and both are done away with in order to tell a story of somebody else's exploration and discovery. This is not uncommon for female characters in stories that are ultimately about men, and reading both *The Curious Case* and *The Zahir* makes me want to rearticulate the systems that close down these women's stories in order to tell the story of the male narrator. Following Haraway's suggestion, I do not wish to make the deaths of Villar and Mary E. 'come out right', but rearticulate them as responses that point towards im/possible and risky spaces - not least if the two women are read as haunting absent presences in each other's tales.

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[68] Death may, however, still evoke *freezing* (or FRE EZIN G, as one particular spectre will later write), as I discuss in Chapter Three: The Void. Here, I explore the interconnections between death, cold and the flows of wireless technology.

10.

Behind the coin.

Teodelina Villar is a famous socialite, who is nonetheless quickly erased from the story of Borges the narrator, as he sets out on a quest for self-discovery. On the day of Villar's wake, Borges comes in possession of the Zahir, a cursed object that takes different shapes according to what era it haunts. It has previously taken the shape of a tiger and a well, an astrolabe and a sailor's compass, yet when it comes into the possession of Borges, it is in the shape of a coin.

As soon as Borges receives the coin, he gets a fever and starts wandering, aimlessly, taken over by strange thoughts that are concerned with time and a virtual sense of futurity: "Possessed … I reflected that there is nothing less material than money, since any coin … is, in all truth, a panoply of possible futures. *Money is abstract*, I said over and over, *money is future time*" (Borges 2000: 82. Emphasis in original). Slowly, the thought of the Zahir takes over his dreams and then his every waking moment. In an attempt to get rid of it, he uses it as payment, yet the dreams and the obsession continue, and he begins researching the myth of the Zahir, discovering that the word *Zahir* is Arabic and "means visible, manifest, evident" as well as "beings or things which have the terrible power to be unforgettable, and whose image eventually drives people mad'" (Borges 2000: 85).

The Zahir, however, is far from completely manifest, visible and evident. Instead, it seems to conjure forth a map of the world that is disturbing and disruptive to anyone who beholds it due to its circling repetitions rather than a linear itinerary: when it haunted the world as a tiger, the Zahir turned into what Borges the narrator calls a 'monstrous image' as a Zahir-possessed artist attempted to depict it. The painting turned out as a map of the world that consisted of tigers within tigers within tigers (Borges 2000: 86). It is this multitude within the supposedly singular that disturbs and unnerves Borges. The Zahir shows glimpses of elsewheres as well as a sense of being as multiple and in movement without the guidance of a cybernetes. Instead, this may be the workings of the uncanny *es*

spukt; something 'spectres', 'tricks', 'jokes'. This is somewhat fitting, considering how *The Zahir* is a humorous tale that pokes fun at the vain and snobbish character Borges the narrator as he falls in love with a shallow, unimaginative woman, writes overly complicated stories, and pretends to be knowledgeable of the world, its creeds and customs. Eventually, however, the story does leave Borges with a promise – which may well be yet another trick - of some kind of divine enlightenment, that is, a promise that at some point the repetitive, the unreal and that which only 'seems' will give way to God himself: "Perhaps by thinking about the Zahir unceasingly, I can manage to wear it away; perhaps behind the coin is God" (Borges 2000: 88). By striving to go 'behind the coin', Borges seems to be searching for an origin, a beginning or centre in the midst of tigers within tigers and *now*s haunting *now*s. In other words, the terrain that he searches for seems to be what Haraway called 'the sacred image of the same' rather than the monstrous image of the tiger within tigers within tigers that was the portrait of the Zahir. Borges wants to travel a path that leads out of the system in order to look at it from a god-eye perspective.

Yet, what if this god-eye perspective is not the promise – or the curse – of the Zahir? What if it is the non-ending – not the happy ending - of the open, haunted system full of tigers within tigers? In that case, I will argue, it is not Borges' story that is the most interesting in *The Zahir*, nor Mr. L.'s in *The Curious Case*. Instead, there are as yet virtual and untold connections between Villar and Mary E. – two characters who do not leave the terrains of the virtual and the uncertain behind, and who seem connected in a dance of relating that is also a dance of death.

11.
An unstable smile.

Villar used to navigate the terrains of money, fashion, and the arts of appearances – what may be called trickery and the arts of 'seeming'. In such spaces, she sought

"the absolute in the ephemeral", which means that "[h]er life was exemplary, and yet an inner desperation constantly gnawed at her. She passed through endless metamorphoses, as though fleeing from herself; her coiffure and the color of her hair were famously unstable, as were her *smile*, her skin, and the slant of her eyes" (Borges 2000: 80. Emphasis added). It is Borges the narrator, who provides this description, and therefore he who sees her as 'desperate' and 'fleeing'. How he knows this, however, is impossible to say, for Villar is never allowed any direct speech in this story – she was dead to begin with, after all. Through her absence, a story is told of a woman, who was seemingly always in the process of metamorphosis as well as running, but never catching up and therefore somewhat *out of time*:

> Teodolina Villar would make her entrances into orthodox places, at the orthodox hour, with orthodox adornments, and with orthodox world-weariness, but the *world-weariness, the adornments, the hour, and the places would almost immediately pass out of fashion*, and so come to serve (upon the lips of Teodelina Villar) for the very epitome of tackiness. (Borges 2000: 80. Emphasis added)

Now … now … now, Derrida and Dinshaw write, and Villar seems to chase the same chain of *now*s and *here*s while always being too late – or too early – never catching up. Eventually, Villar's strange temporalities are emphasised in death: "Teodelina Villar committed the breach of decorum of dying in the middle of Barrio Sur", Borges writes (Borges 2002: 80-81), and in so doing she apparently *re*turns – *revenant*-like – to a past self:

> At some point on the confused night of June 6, Teodelina Villar magically became what she had been twenty years before; her features recovered the authority that arrogance, money, youth, the awareness of being the crème de la crème, restrictions, a lack of imagination, and stolidity can give. My thoughts were more or less these: No version of that face that had so disturbed me shall ever be as memorable as this one; really, *since it could be almost the first, it ought to be the*

last. I left her lying stiff among the flowers, her contempt for the world growing every moment more perfect in death. (Borges 2000: 81. Emphasis added)

The return of Villar to her former self is used to ridicule her; she lacks imagination, Borges says, and she possesses an arrogance and contempt for the world that she has now left behind. She lingers among the flowers, a pretty, inanimate corpse, and Borges finds something else to obsess about: the Zahir and its promise that the ephemeral and abstract will become manifest. In this sense, Borges changes one object for another: Villar for the Zahir, and so the Zahir and Villar never meet.

There is, however, an almost hauntological dimension to Borges the narrator's description of Villar's appearance in death. As Derrida puts it in *Spectres of Marx*: "Repetition *and* first time, but also repetition *and* last time, since the singularity of any *first time*, makes of it also a *last time* … Let us call it a *hauntology*" (Derrida 2011: 10. Emphasis in original). Here, Derrida is discussing the paradox of beginnings; in order for something to be truly a first, it must also be the last. This means that in order for an origin to be an origin, it must also be its own ending. In death, Villar's first face becomes her last, and it is a 'disturbing' face, as Borges the narrator puts it. 'Unnerving', Derrida might have said, as he did about encountering the returned face of Ogier. This 'disturbing' face carries an unstable smile in the sense of that which is 'treacherous' and 'tricky' as well as 'apt to move',[69] and so in 2008 it returns, moving silently through the *danse* of relating, to reappear on the face of a demon dog.[70] Though never given anything to say in *The Zahir*, Villar seems to speak silently through this grin as well as through Mary E., another woman

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[69] I am connecting two words here: 'unstable' and its etymological relative 'fickle'. 'Unstable' means 'apt to move' as well as 'fickle'. 'Fickle' means 'treacherous' and 'tricky'. See:
Online Etymology Dictionary: unstable (adj.). Link:
http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=unstable Last accessed: April 2016.
Online Etymolgy Dictionary: fickle (adj.). Link:
http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=fickle Last accessed: April 2016.
[70] My supervisor, Nina Lykke, has been referring to Smile.dog as a 'she' since she first saw it. Even though I think of Smile.dog as an 'it', I agree that 'she' is also very fitting - not least due to its 'unstable smile', which may be a haunting trace of Villar.

whose string of spectral *nows* is out of joint.[71] Together, they map out a terrain that stretches from the 1940s to the new millennium, reaching through spectral spheres of money, of promises, of curses, of digital media. *The Curious Case* takes form in this dance of death between Villar and Mary E. and Smile.dog, opening up the stories rather than attempting to 'fix' the non-linear streams of *nows* that connect them. Repetition *and* last time, that is how the virtual spaces of spectres work, and as the reader of *The Curious Case* is about to find out, the curse of the unstable smile has been passed on. As has the traces of the astrolabe, the sailor's compass and the map of the world – all tools that do not portray the world as it is, but trick and lie in order to offer themselves as tools to navigate virtual spaces yet to materialise, but sometimes already carved out in a gesture of absolute hospitality.

The glimpse of Villar's disturbing smile within the story of *The Curious Case* offers a possible, spectral response in the shape of an opening up towards a non-ending, a virtual terrain that points toward *nows* in the past and *nows* yet to come. Villar never left a suicide-note, but she speaks through Mary E., the 1990s sysop, and both point towards an arrival yet-to-come, carving out a place for *something* in the expectation of a beyond the instant: *And who was to say that something worse would not come for me if I did as the creature asked?* This arriving *something* maps out possible futures that do not reveal an authentic 'behind' or 'outside'. Like Villar, the *arrivant* never 'catches up' but is always somewhat 'out of time', pointing to the gaps between words and world and how the image is never full. Instead, it shows a monstrous picture of a dog grinning from out of the void.

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[71] 'Time is out of joint' is a phrase that Derrida has borrowed from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and that he keeps returning to throughout *Spectres of Marx* (2011).

12.

Another Zahir for another traveller.

"Do you believe in ghosts?" the spectre of Pascale Ogier asked Derrida, and as he watched *Ghost Dance* again, the question returned, as did her own response: "Yes, now I do, yes". This was a spectral *now*, one that seemed to arrive both from the past and the future, a place of the past and a place from beyond the grave. "Which now?" Derrida wondered, unnerved as – for just one ghostly moment – time and space came out of joint, mapping out the shortest of glimpses of another world. This unreal *now* demanded an ethical response as much as any 'immediate', 'present' reality would. "To be just: beyond the living present," Derrida writes. This is a justice extended to a "spectral moment, a moment that no longer belongs to time, if one understands by this word the linking of modalized presents (past present, actual present: 'now,' future present)" (Derrida 2011: xix). Justice, in other words, has to reach beyond the living present as well as beyond *presence*. Whereas law concerns itself with those who can be named and identified, justice concerns the relation with those who have gone before, those who are yet to come, and those who never will be. It is about relating to the unknown, ambiguity and risk, rather than doing away with uncertainty. Therein lies the possibility for difference that is not a reproduction of what has already been, but something truly else.

Ogier's response, which was spectral from the very beginning, unnerved Derrida and for a spectral *now* it rearranged the terrain of time and space. I do not wish to argue that Ogier's response is the same as the one offered by for example Villar and Mary E., since Pascale Ogier was an acquaintance of Derrida, whom she was later to haunt and unnerve. Yet, there seems to be some similar structures of spectral *now*s and uncanny, haunted terrains at play when it comes to Ogier looking back at Derrida through a TV, and Villar and Mary E. haunting the tales of *The Zahir* and *The Curious Case* through an unstable smile. Here, too, there are traces of virtualities yet to materialize and the workings of haunting effects. Rather than

shutting down these virtualities by taking the path of Borges the narrator, Villar and Mary E. take the route suggested by Haraway, as she says:

> The purpose of this excursion is to write theory, i.e., to produce a patterned vision of how to move and what to fear in the topography of an impossible but all-too-real present, in order to find an absent, but perhaps possible, other present. I do not seek the address of some full presence; reluctantly, I know better. (Haraway 1992: 295)

The patterned vision offered by the hauntings of Mary E. and Villar is not the full presence of Borges the narrator's God behind the object itself, but the 'seeming' of the virtual, unfolding like the promises – and curse - of a monster and therefore open to rearticulations.

According to the legend, as told by Borges the narrator, all things can become a Zahir, yet there can only be one Zahir at a time. The Zahir seems to reflect the time it is of, such as when "[i]n the Age of Ignorance it was the idol called Yahuk" (Borges 2000: 86). According to *The Curious Case*, the Zahir of a digital *here* and *now* may well be a cursed JPEG that sprang to life in the early 1990s, where it encountered the sysop Mary E. and stayed in her company for 16 years. It may also be haunted by Teodelina Villar, a woman who lives in the realm of spectres that is fashion and money, chasing a full presence that is constantly deferred while carrying that hauntingly unstable smile, soon to resurface elsewhere.

If Smile.jpg is the Zahir of a digital time and age, it seems to offer a navigational tool that would not be one recognizable to Ess' cybernetes; it does not offer virtues through which the future and responses of others can be predicted, but virtue as appearance, trickery and the spectral space of the promise. It is the ghostly *now* that for a moment disturbs time and space through open systems – connections between strings of spectral *nows*, of narratives, of systems, of human and non-human actors – offering a 'generative disturbance', that is, a response that for just a moment shows what might be on its way. It creates realities through relations with the yet to come, the spectral effect of the promise that is yet to

emerge. In this emerging lies the possibility for listening to other voices, to other agencies as they haunt the structures of an open system, and to respond to them, actively participating in the dance of relating offered by virtual terrains. Here there be elsewheres, and the Zahir may show the way, not through already existing spaces, but emerging ones. Such navigation requires an ethics that is not about control, but about risk and openness to the unexpected, that is, justice as a question of welcoming the monstrous *arrivant* by carving out a place for it in advance, out of time.

"And who was to say something worse would not come for me if I did as the creature asked?" Mary E. writes. She never receives an answer, for there is none to give; exactly what will happen if one does as Smile.dog asks is impossible to say. There is only one way for the reader to find out: by responding to the (sometimes) unexpected encounter with Smile.dog as it suddenly appears at the end of a text.

onwards

In this chapter, I have argued that the uncertain ontology of the virtual, which Haraway detected in the travels into the terrains of sci-fi webs, may be understood as a hauntology, that is, an ontology that focuses on the agency of the absent present, such as the effects of a promise or a curse. This is an ontology that cannot be separated from a call for an ethics of responsibility towards the agency of the virtual as well as justice extended as hospitality towards what may or may not materialise from such agency. A response is here understood as a generative disruption that suddenly and perhaps just for a moment shows a glimpse of an elsewhere, another world.

By reading *The Curious Case of Smile.jpg* and *The Zahir* through one another, I have argued that the cursed object of the Zahir may work as a guide in a spectral, digital time and age – not by establishing a route to take through already existing terrains, but by showing glimpses of haunting multitudes within an open,

mutating system. Crucial to such and ethics is the monstrous *arrivant*/*revenant*; the figure of the improper, fragmented stranger who arrives, its effects experienced as an altering of the self's threshold in the present, while belonging to a yet-to-come future.

In the following chapter, I will move from the spectral terrains of the curse and the promise, to the *nothing* and the *something* of the abyssal void.
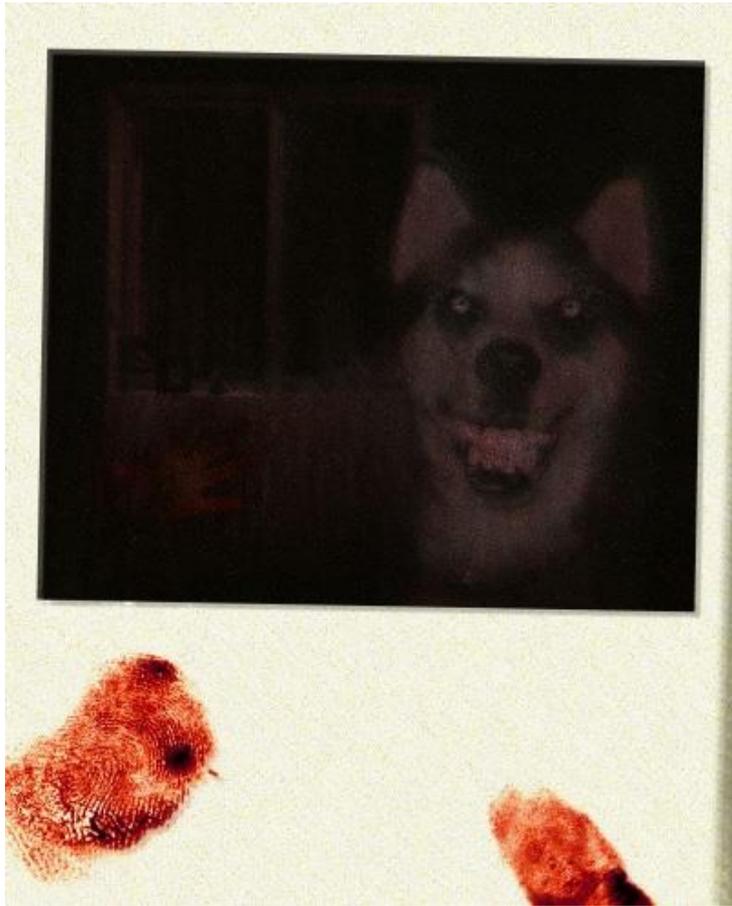
Smile.jpg (ca. 2008)

CHAPTER THREE
The Void

1.

"Fear the night sky." Abyss, anxiety, aporia.

"Here's a public service message to all the children in our audience," the radio-host announces. He continues:

> Children, the night sky may seem like a scary thing sometimes. And it is. It's a *very* scary thing. Look at the stars, twinkling silently. They are so far away that none of us will ever get to even the closest one. They are dead-eyed sigils of our own failures against distance and mortality. And behind them, just the void. That nothingness that is everything, that everything that is nothing. Even the blinking light of an airplane streaking across it does not seem to assuage the tiniest bit of its blackness — like throwing a single stray ember into the depths of a vast arctic ocean. And what if the void is not as *void* as we thought? What could be coming towards us out of the distance? Insentient asteroid with a chance trajectory? Sentient beings with a malicious trajectory? What good could come of this? What good, children, could come of *any* of this?
>
> Fear the night sky, children**,** and sleep tight in your beds, and the inadequate shelters of blankets and parental love.
>
> Sleep sound, children.
>
> (*Welcome to Night Vale*. Episode 24: *The Mayor* [2013]. 06:11 – 08:10. Emphasis added)

In the small desert town of Night Vale, the void is an omnipresence, something unknowable and indifferent, a nothingness that is everything, an everything that is nothing, as the radio-host Cecil puts it. In some form or another, the void sneaks

into most of his broadcasts: it is a proverb[72] ("Look, up in the sky! It's a bird! It's a plane! No, it's just the void. Infinite and indifferent"); [73] it is a colour in the seven-day sky forecast ("Monday: Turquoise, Tuesday: Taupe, Wednesday: Robin's Egg, Thursday: Turquoise/taupe, Friday: Coal dust, Saturday: Coal dust with chances of indigo in the late afternoon, Sunday: void"),[74] and it takes part in the Children's Fun Fact Science Corner (as in the quote above). It even appears in an announcement from the Night Vale School District, which states that "[a]stronomy will now be conducting stargazing sessions only with blindfolds on every participant, in order to protect them from the existential terror of the void".[75] The School District cannot keep the existential terror of the void at bay for long, though. "How can we place any importance on something so insignificant as math or spelling or history when the void has already swallowed our tiny existence?" it asks. "We are ants, crushed daily by the indifferent feet of the universe, and – it's just no good anymore! We can't carry on like this."[76]

It is not only Night Vale that is haunted by the disturbing nature of the void. The void – not least in the shape of the unfathomable and boundless abyss – appears in some aspects of poststructuralist and postmodernist theory as well.[77] In the case of deconstruction, it is not least Derrida's well-known statement that "there is nothing outside of the text" (quoted in Kirby 2014: 53) that for some has opened a "dizzying abyss" (Appelbaum 2009: ix), finding *nothing* where they thought they would find *something*, and – uncannily – finding *something* where they expected to find *nothing*. As feminist new materialist Stacy Alaimo argues in her work on the deep seas, gazing into the abyss may offer the "vertiginous

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[72] The proverbs of *Welcome to Night Vale* never appear as traditional proverbs, since they do not tend to offer any obvious moral teachings nor advice. Instead, they lead the listener astray by wandering off in surprising directions.
[73] *Welcome to Night Vale*, episode 36: *Missing* (2013). 29.09 – 29.20.
[74] *Welcome to Night Vale*, episode 3: *Station Management* (2012). 04:15 – 04:39.
[75] *Welcome to Night Vale*, episode 5: *The Shape in Grove Park* (2012). 10:47 – 10:59.
[76] *Welcome to Night Vale*, episode 22: *The Whispering Forest* (2013). 03:08 – 03:33.
[77] Of course, both the void and the abyss appear within other branches of theory and scholarly traditions as well. Since hauntology is my main concern, I have, however, chosen to stay with the issue of deconstruction as it relates to the abyssal void, rather than give a more general introduction to the history of the figure of the void.

recognition that there is, indeed, 'being rather than nothing'" (2013: 234), as *something* that was not supposed *to be* suddenly stares back.

Nothing outside of the text is the world as an open system that removes the ground from underneath the feet of those who wish to see it in its entirety, enjoying the god-eye perspective and the certainties it grants. In this removal of steady ground, the abyss opens up as what feminist theorist Astrid Schrader – discussing Heidegger - has called "*Abgrund*, a bottomless, unfathomable ground" (2015: 672), which for some makes it tempting to return to an ethics of rules, rights and regulations. Indeed, as Margrit Shildrick points out, for some "the vertigo of the deconstructive abyss … might be averted not only by reconstituting value, but [also] by reinstating the centrality of the human" (2002: 120). In other words, the crushing indifference and ontological uncertainties of an open, abyssal system may be countered by reinstating solid ground beneath (the two) human feet, returning to moral values that rely on law as rights and duties, as well as on human exceptionalism.

Within a traditional ethics of rights and duties distributed according to hierarchies of confirmed identities, the abyssal void does, indeed, appear as what Karen Barad in her work on quantum physics and nothingness calls an "ethically questionable, shadowy character" (2012: 12).[78] Even within deconstruction, the void and the abyss are regarded with what is at times both desire and suspicion. It is the abyssal void that allows for a sense of open-enededness, but not without risk.

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[78] It is worth stressing that Barad herself does not understand the void as ethically questionable. Instead, she argues that the void opens up to a relational ethics of justice-to-come. She does so through her work on quantum physics and not least her study of so-called virtual particles. Such particles, she argues, enjoy a strange, ghostly indeterminacy as they seem to flicker in and out of existence – not unlike intern Maureen, who will appear later in this chapter.

Quantum physics is an interesting point of entry when it comes to discussing nothingness and the void. In order to avoid moving in too many directions, I have, however, chosen not to go into a discussion of quantum physics, instead exploring the void through anxiety, aporia and the abyss. The absence of a discussion on quantum physics does, however, haunt this chapter, not least when it comes to the subject of the ether(ic ocean). For more on quantum physics and the void, see Close 2009.

As literary theorist Gayatri Spivak writes somewhat warningly in her foreword to Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (1997):[79]

> By inaugurating the open-ended indefiniteness of textuality – by thus "placing in the abyss" … - [deconstruction] shows us the lure of the abyss as freedom. The fall into the abyss of deconstruction inspires us with as much pleasure as fear. We are intoxicated with the prospect of never hitting bottom. (Spivak in Derrida 1997: lxxvii).

The abyss, Spivak argues, is not a question of relativism and absolute freedom, nor is it existence imagined as free-floating systems suspended in a vacuum, unrelated to anything else. Instead, as I read Derrida and Spivak, it is the world as an open system, as discussed in the previous chapter. It concerns *nothing outside of text* as a suspension in the abyssal void, where immediacy and full presence are constantly deferred and ethics is a question of risky openness towards uncertainty.

In this chapter, I will discuss the possibility of understanding the abyssal void not as an 'ethically questionable character', nor as a purely positive figure, but as something else; an ethical relation that is not about value or morals, but about greeting the monstrous *arrivant*. "What good could come of this?" Cecil asked, echoing the concern of Mary E.: "And who was to say something worse would not come for me if I did as the creature asked?" The answer to these questions never arrives, suspending Mary E., Cecil and their readers/listeners in a tense awaiting. What might happen if this tense awaiting is not resolved, but instead continues, opening an abyssal void of endless deferrals rather than solutions?

A possible place to explore such tense awaiting, while facing the nothingness of the void, is the western, cultural imaginary of wireless tele-technology. This particular imaginary repeatedly calls upon the void to simultaneously connect and disperse. It opens up to tales of greatness, exploration and the discovery of truth and secrets, but it also removes the ground from

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[79] I am grateful to Jodey Castricano, who suggested I revisit *On Grammatology* to find the voids.

underneath the feet of the traveller, often revealing that there is no bottom and no final answer, only deferral through the abyss. This withdrawal of steady ground to reveal *something* where one expected *nothing* may, I argue, cause a certain anxiety. Indeed, according to psychoanalyst Roberto Harari's readings of Jacques Lacan (Harari 2001), anxiety is sparked by relations with nothingness and the void and may cause the opposite of heroic travelling, that is, an aporetic slowing down. As the School District said after encountering the void: *it's just no good anymore! We can't carry on like this*. In this slowing down, perhaps there is a possibility for responding to the *something* that arrives from out of *nothing*?

In order to explore a relational ethics of the abyssal void, I will begin in Night Vale: a small town, whose void is both mediated and created by (digital) tele-technologies, anxiety, and relations with strange terrains *beyond*.

2.

An open door. An empty glass. A spreading stain.

The void in *Welcome to Night Vale* is both disturbingly close and overwhelmingly far away. It is, as mentioned above, a *nothing* from which *something* arrives, as well as a *nothing* through which *something* disappears, such as in the case of the station intern Maureen, who drank orange juice:

> Oh! Oh dear! Maureen just flickered. Like, she was there, and then she wasn't, and then she was, like when a plane flies in front of the sun and the light leaves for a brief moment as you wonder – for just that split second – "Is this it? Is it over?" Only to have the sun return as your brain hears the faint hum of a distant jet and you sigh with relief and disappointment that everything is as it was. A similar thing just happened with Maureen.
> Listen–
> Maureen, I–
> She is backing out of the studio.

She is backing out of the studio.

She has dropped the glass.

She is flickering.

She is flickering…

She is gone.

Listeners, Maureen is gone!

I hear no hum of jets, I– I see no intern, just … an open door. And an empty glass,

and a spreading stain.

(*Welcome to Night Vale*, episode 38: *Orange Grove* [2014]. 14:50 – 15:54)

The stain, we later discover, is void: "There's still an empty O.J. Glass on the floor. The carpet around it is dark – not with liquid stain, but … with void".[80] The puddle of void seems to have transferred Maureen into a spectral terrain that is otherwise only supposed to materialise for the briefest of moments - now, yes, here, *now* I believe in ghosts, as Ogier said - before disappearing again. *For a brief moment … you wonder – for just that split second – "Is this it? Is it over?"* Cecil said.

For a brief moment something different and unexpected appears, a disruptive response, only to withdraw again. But not for Maureen, who seems to have entered a new space: the empty depths behind all existence. "[A]s we all know, nothing can be fully understood to be 'real'", Cecil says. "Any description of the world we give is simply the world we *experience* – which is to say, a narrative we force onto whatever horror or *void* lies behind the scrim of our perception."[81] The void, according to Cecil, is the *nothing* that lies behind everything, and if *something* is removed, this *nothing* will be revealed as a dizzying abyss. Yet, paradoxically, it is this abyssal void that made existence possible to begin with:

Well, listeners, this has been another day, another night, another bit of time in this bit of space. I'm sitting at my desk, feet planted on old, thinning carpet, but

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[80] *Welcome to Night Vale*, episode 38: *Orange Grove* (2014). 23:32 – 23:44.
[81] *Welcome to Night Vale*, episode 38: *Orange Grove* (2014). 12:06 – 12:25.

in my mind I am anywhere but. I am above, in the sky above, looking down at our little Night Vale. I see the lights, in grids and curves, and the places where there are no lights, because they are off … or missing … or invisible.

I see roads with cars and the cars have people in them. And the people are traveling through the dark in the comfort and light of the cars, and I see all of this from above. I see where the town gives way gradually to the desert; the last few lights from the last few homesteads, like stray sparks from a campfire, tossed out into the absolute black of the Scrublands and the Sand Wastes.

I see the orbit of citizen around citizen. All these ordinary Night Valians, about their ordinary lives, in this singular, extraordinary place we call home.

Moving higher into the cold, thin air of the upper atmosphere, I see below me the criss-crossed lines of contrails and chemtrails, the signature of air machines that have long since moved on; the footprint of our civilization upon the night sky. And looking up I see only the stars, and the void, all a little closer than they were before. All still so un-reachably distant.

I have something of urgent importance to tell you, but I will tell it to you later. Or I will tell it to you not at all. Certainly I will not tell it to you now. Now I merely look, from the vantage point of my own imagination, down at a town busy with its own existence.

And, for now, existence is enough. Stay tuned next for an exact word-for-word repeat of this broadcast, that will seem to you imperceptibly but unshakably different … although you will never be able to explain *why*.

(*Welcome to Night Vale*, episode 18: *The Traveler* [2013]. 21:00 – 24:00. Emphasis added)

In the Children's Fun Fact Science Corner, Cecil described the void as a cold, dark, arctic ocean that swallows the light and warmth of an ember. Here, seemingly suspended in an abyssal void of his imagination, he describes much the same; light is framed by cold darkness that threatens to extinguish it and swallow the warmth of 'stray sparks'. The home and everyday life is *here*, *now*, but only because it – like Cecil – is suspended in the unfathomable and boundless abyss of the void. As in the case of Maureen, the void may at any moment overflow its boundaries – the night-

sky is 'ever-widening',[82] Cecil tells us - hungrily eating into the fabric of reality. Indeed, the O on Maureen's O.J. glass is drawn as a sun with "a strained, toothy smile",[83] suggesting a mouth more than capable of biting into existence, leaving behind holes and open doors through which *something* may both disappear and arrive.

Waiting and yearning and fearing disappearances and arrivals open up towards spectral spaces, not least through deferral; here, it is Cecil who is suspended in the abyss, moving through the depths of the void, waiting to tell us something important that we must know but cannot know until he tells us – which may be never, but we cannot be certain. Like the curse of Smile.dog, Cecil's promise opens up towards a terrain of the virtual, a terrain of disturbing spectral *nows* that keep unfolding: *I will not tell it to you* now. Now *I merely look, from the vantage point of my own imagination, down at a town busy with its own existence. And, for* now*, existence is enough*. Now … now … now … maybe *now* he will tell us? The space that is opened in this awaiting and yearning is, I will argue, not dissimilar to Maureen's moment of void; a moment that keeps extending and unfolding, since the hum of the jet never returns, nor does the sun, leaving one to wait and wait, all while the door remains open.

Existence in the abyss is made possible through the impossibility of the message that never arrives, as well as through the yearning and the tense awaiting of the listener. "Don't for a minute think that there are no material effects of yearning and imagining", Barad writes (2012: 13). *Here*, *now* existence seems an effect of yearning and (Cecil's) imagining. It may also, however, be the effect of something else. Indeed, according to Harari, relating to an ever-widening *nothing* through the tense awaiting of the arrival of *something* may be the experience of anxiety.

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[82] *Welcome to Night Vale*, episode 22: *The Whispering Forest* (2013). 03:03.
[83] *Welcome to Night Vale*, episode 38: *Orange Grove* (2014). 10:30 – 10:35. I will discuss the interconnections between smiles and eating in Chapter Four: The Smile.

3.

A relation with nothing. Anxiety as lack that lacks.

In his foreword to Roberto Harari's book on Lacan's seminar on anxiety, Charles Shepherdson explains that Lacanian anxiety does not revolve around an object that is "reducible to a real, objective threat (an object of 'fear')" but instead something that "brings us up against the void, the negativity, and the absence which have so preoccupied the philosophers in their accounts of the subject, being, and nothingness" (Shepherdson in Harari 2001: xxv). As such, anxiety becomes a question of a relation with *nothing*, which means that Lacanian anxiety differs from a traditional Freudian understanding, where anxiety has no object and is first of all defined by *lack*. In the case of Lacan's theories, however, anxiety arises when *lack* comes to be *lacking*, as Harari and Shepherdson explain (Harari 2001).

Anxiety as lack that is lacking has its roots in the mirror-stage, when the child begins to see itself as a separate being from its mother, sometimes referred to as the Primordial Other. It is this separation that makes it possible for the child to enter the symbolic order and develop language. It also allows the child to develop a sense of wholeness and boundedness through the establishing of an ideal 'imaginary body' (Shepherdson in Harari 2001: li) separate from the mother, making the child able to move independently as a gathered organism. The separation that takes place during the mirror stage, however, leaves a lack in the subject that needs to be covered by the so-called *object a*[84] in order for the subject to appear whole. *Object a* is the "goal of desire … caught up in an endless series of displacements in the place of the other that substitute for the originary loss of the first love-object, the mother", Shildrick explains (2009: 94-95). In other words, *object a* is a position that can be inhabited by a series of objects, each imagined to be able to make the subject whole again. This promise of wholeness is, however, never actualised and so keeps being deferred, making *object a* take new forms that are never quite

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[84] The original French term is *objet petit a* (Shildrick 2009: 94). I refer to the translation – *object a* - as it appears in Harari 2001.

enough.[85] "Stop while you are still whole," Mary E. warns Mr. L., yet none of them *are* whole, which is the very reason that she can word that warning to begin with. *Lack* comes to be *lacking* when *a* is doing too good a job of hiding the lack in the subject, and this is what causes anxiety to spring up, warning the subject that the Other is too close for comfort and that the distinguishing cut is disappearing.

According to Harari, the Primordial Other is perceived as threatening since it is all that which the subject does not wish to be, that is, without boundary, non-unitary, without language. In its boundlessness, this Other is experienced almost as a hungry void that seeks to swallow the self. In its role as such a swallowing mouth, the void calls out to the subject, asking that it gives itself to this boundless nothingness, and that it does so unconditionally. In other words, in anxiety the void becomes an abyss, a bottomless hole of infinite depths:

> it should be pointed out that what comes to the fore in a symptom … such as a phobia of heights, is actually a phobia of "lower depths." It is the abyss … that is calling. The subject who suffers from vertigo perceives a call to which he or she is about to answer, throwing him- or herself into the void. Beyond the vertigo itself, it is what summons one to jump into space, which is characterized specifically by not having any defined borders and being a void. (Harari 2001: 74, emphasis in original)

Harari explains that "*the Other requires that the subject erase its borders, handing itself over to it in an unconditional manner*" (Harari 2001: 75. Emphasis in original). In other words, the void of the Other seems to demand of the subject absolute hospitality, that is, that the subject gives itself unconditionally while risking its own status as bounded, the very threshold between self and other renegotiated,

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[85] As Danish literary theorist Lilian Munk Rösing puts it: "The object of desire is what Lacan calls 'little object a'. 'Little object a' is not a concrete object, but what you might call the position of desire, which is inhabited by replaceable and never quite satisfactory objects" (Munk Rösing 2005: 137. Translated by me. Original Danish: "Begærets objekt er det som Lacan kalder 'lille objekt a'. 'Lille objekt a' er ikke noget konkret objekt, men så at sige selve objektets position, som så bliver indtaget af udskiftelige og aldrig fuldt tilfredsstillende objekter").

possibly destroyed. In this destruction, the unitary, ideal imaginary body is fragmented and turned into the *corps morcelé* – the body in pieces. This body, Shepherdson explains, makes it difficult for the subject to move, meaning that anxiety disturbs "bodily coherence, locomotion, and motor coordination" (Shepherdson in Harari 2001: li). As such, the subject seems suspended in aporia, as it encounters the void in anxiety, and, as previously discussed, aporia is a haunted place to be. This brings me to something that traditional, Freudian anxiety and Lacanian anxiety have in common: a strange, almost *revenant*-like approach to temporality.

According to Freud, anxiety is characterised as an experience of expectation and waiting for something yet to come. This thing that is yet to come, however, is something that has already taken place. In other words, anxiety is the projection into the future of a past event, creating a tense waiting for something that has already happened.[86] In Lacanian anxiety, this return of the past through the future can be understood as the merging of void and subject, and in this threat of merging, the subject is reminded that it owes its unity and boundedness to something outside of itself, that is, to a constitutive Other. In other words, there is a haunted and uncanny side to the mirror-stage, evoking a "ghostly inheritance and an unresolved debt or promise" (Castricano 2001: 10). Indeed, according to Harari (2001: 61- 62), Lacanian anxiety is related to Freud's text on the uncanny, not least when it comes to understanding anxiety as lack that lacks. The uncanny, Freud writes, is the return of something that was once familiar – here, I will argue, the void - which has since been repressed to a point where it no longer seems

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[86] I am here referring to what Freud calls '*Angstsignal*'. This, however, is only one out of three kinds of anxiety that he is operating with: *Realangst*, *Automatische Angst* and *Angstsignal*. *Realangst*, what Charles Shepherdson calls 'realistic anxiety' (Harari 2001: xxxiv), is very similar to fear, in that it relates to an external danger that threatens the life of the individual. *Automatische Angst*, however, occurs when the unity of the ego is threatened by an automatic increase of tension within the psychic economy. This tension can be caused by external as well as internal sources, such as meetings (external) or nightmares (internal). Finally, *Angstsignal*, or 'signal anxiety', is a signal of things to come, based on past experiences. It is also the version of Freudian anxiety that I will be engaging with here. See Shepherdson in Harari 2001: xxxiv-xxxv.

recognizable, while still evoking a certain recognition. It has become a lack that lacks, to use Lacan's phrase, and moves according to the logics of the *revenant*.

I will argue that Lacanian anxiety may be a way to understand and imagine the self's relation to nothingness and the boundless void, that is, as a tense yearning and waiting for the return of the *arrivant/revenant*. This is a yearning and waiting that has an effect in the present in the form of aporia. A place to explore such anxious aporia further, without seeking to solve it, is the western cultural imaginary of wireless tele-technology. This imaginary has a long history of threatening the boundary between self and other by revealing boundless, flowing depths that promise adventures as well as unfathomable dangers – not least through the blurring of boundaries between the realms of the 'natural' world and the terrains of the 'supernatural'.

4.

On the etheric ocean and digital technology.

The void that transported Maureen away was a strangely liquid one, spreading like a puddle. This - the void as fluid and flowing - has a long history within the western imaginary of tele-technology, and it seems to have resurfaced in the context of digital media and Wi-Fi. An example of the imaginary of the fluid void of tele-technology can be found in yet another *Welcome to Night Vale* episode, this time the story of the so-called Desert Otherworld.

The Desert Otherworld is an alternate dimension that may be entered and exited through a non-existent house. This house is "the one in the Desert Creek Development," Cecil explains. "It *looks* like it exists – like it's *right there* when you look at it, and it's between two other identical houses, so it would make more sense for it to be there than not".[87] But it is not. Staring into the house, scientists have established that images of lighthouses hang on the walls, and reports from the

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[87] *Welcome to Night Vale*, episode 38: *Orange Grove* (2014). 16:24 – 16:37.

Desert Otherworld itself reveal that this alternate dimension is indeed overlooked by the watchful eye of an actual lighthouse. Yet, since the Desert Otherworld is a desert – as is Night Vale – there are no difficult waters for the lighthouse to warn sailors about. Despite the street-name, there is no Desert Creek in either Night Vale or the Desert Otherworld. Yet, the absence of water has not kept it from having a profound effect on the community of Night Vale, which even has its own Harbour and Waterfront Recreation Area. "Now, there *is* some concern about the fact that, given we are in the middle of a desert, there is no actual water at the waterfront," Cecil reports. "And that is a definite drawback, I agree".[88] The lack of water, however, does not keep him from being very excited about the waterfront.

Connected by desert and absent present water, Night Vale and the Desert Otherworld are perfectly capable of communicating – not least through an excellent Wi-Fi connection. Speaking of the Desert Otherworld, Cecil explains that "cell phone batteries last *forever* there, and there's pretty good Wi-Fi, despite there being just vast amounts of sand … "[89] The void of the desert – with its non-existent ocean - works as an almost perfect connection between worlds. Yet, the void also separates, as Cecil finds out when his partner, Carlos, is trapped in the Otherworld. In spite of being able to reach each other via Wi-Fi, they are far apart, their sporadic contact a reminder of the distance.

It is not only in Night Vale that vast expanses of absent present water helps to both connect and disconnect users of tele-technology. On the contrary, tele-technologies have a long history of being imagined as connections that reach across voids, and one of the first voids to be traversed by such technology was the sea. "[T]he open seas have long been considered empty space," Stacy Alaimo explains. "[T]he social construction of the sea in industrial capitalism has been that of a 'vast void,' an 'empty transportation surface, beyond the space of social relations.'" (2013: 233-234). The vast void was imagined as a space to be travelled, a means of transportation, a medium that made the passing of goods and messages

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[88] *Welcome to Night Vale*, episode 1: *Pilot* (2012). 07:08 – 07:23.
[89] *Welcome to Night Vale*, episode 50: *Capital Campaign* (2014). 06:37 – 06:46.

possible. With the development of wireless technology, ships could communicate with one another, as well as with land, crossing the void and defying its vast distances. Eventually, wireless tele-technology became more widespread, moving from the seas into the living rooms of those who could afford it. Yet, the nautical associations lingered, as media theorist Jeffrey Sconce explains, speaking of the developments of tele-technologies during not least the late 19th and early-to-mid 20th century:

> In refiguring the concept of transmission from the wired connection to the more mysterious wandering signal, accounts of wireless and radio returned consistently to the structuring metaphor of the "etheric ocean." Bound at first, perhaps, to the medium's origins in maritime applications, this most fluid of communication metaphors became a powerful conceptual tool for engaging … the new electronic environment … Oceanic metaphors proved versatile in capturing the seeming omnipresence, unfathomable depths and invisible mysteries of … radio's ether … - mammoth, fluid bodies that, like the sea, were ultimately boundless and unknowable. (Sconce 2000: 63)

The oceanic metaphor that structures wireless technologies opened up to still new possibilities and terrains to conquer: those of the human mind. Within a western context, the human consciousness has long been imagined as fluid and flowing, something capable of transcending the body. In the early days of wireless technology, some – for example spiritualists – therefore argued that the flows of wireless and the streams of the mind could be harnessed in order to travel new terrains that were awaiting in other dimensions. The spiritualist as well as the user of wireless technologies were thus imagined to be capable of navigating and controlling the dangerous waters of the etheric ocean and the human mind and consciousness alike. Referring back to Charles Ess, one might say that the travellers of the etheric ocean took on the role of the cybernetes, the ship's pilot, expertly steering through new worlds. Indeed, spiritualist mediums were sometimes directly compared to "wholly realized cybernetic beings – electromagnetic devices bridging

flesh and spirit, body and machine, material reality and electronic space" (Sconce 2000: 27).

As the final frontier, the void of the etheric ocean brought together the mysteries of the extra-terrestrial of the sea, outer space and the land of the dead, offering exploration into unimaginable depths. "Through its early association with shipping, the sea, and distant lands, wireless evoked both the wonders and slight apprehension over the depthless and inescapable void the technology had revealed to the world," Sconce explains. "The ether was its own ocean, at once vast and diffuse, that beckoned explorers to navigate its unfathomable depths" (2000: 65). According to Haraway, the trope of going deep in order to explore and find the 'truth' about the world has a long history and forms part of an imaginary of a controlling "techno-erotic touch that goes ever deeper" (1991[D]: 205). Yet, going deeper is not always without its risks.

5.

Voids, flows and the problem of personality.

Whereas the flows of the human mind and wireless technologies promised travels to new terrains, they also, however, sparked a certain 'apprehension', as Sconce mentioned. This apprehension, I argue, was connected to the void-like nature of flows - at least if considering Harari's definition of a void as that which has no defined borders. According to feminist theorist Lisa Blackman that is a way to understand flows as well, since a flow "does not have a definable beginning and end, it appears to not have discernible boundaries and moves across and between spaces which cannot be mapped through linear, spatialized, measurable co-ordinates" (2013: 68). Like the void, the flow is boundless, it moves according to non-linear coordinates and it is transgressive, threatening the subject with contamination. Herein was the trouble with the structuring metaphor of oceans and flows; as Blackman explains, the streams and flows of new communication-

technologies – whether wireless technology, electricity or the séance – opened up the subject to its surroundings, presenting it as permeable as well as overflowing and therefore at risk of being taken over by the flows of its others, too. This challenged traditional understandings of the subject as bounded and unitary – the ideal outcome of the mirror-stage - creating instead what she refers to as 'the problem of personality':

> This problem took form within the context of particular surfaces of emergence, such as the crowd, the séance, and the development of communication technologies such as film, the printing press and radio during the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries … communication was seen to defy fixed boundaries between the self and the other, material and immaterial and even the dead and alive, and to operate in registers which were 'invisible' and not easy to see, register, measure or verify. (Blackman 2013: 27)

I argue that the cultural imaginary of tele-technologies as void-like, deep and potentially contagious and overflowing still linger in the imaginaries concerning digital media. After all, the world wide web is to a large extent structured by nautical metaphors, such as *streaming*, *phishing*, *surfing, trolling*, and *piracy*. One of the sites that hosts the *Welcome to Night Vale* podcast is even called pod*bay*. Further still, the 'invisible registers' mentioned by Blackman seem to evoke Sandra Robinson's discussion of the workings of the internet discussed in the introduction. "Communication and information technology and networks feel present … yet are *unseen*," she writes (2014: 1. Emphasis added). Indeed, these present yet unseen technologies seem to map out a sense of depth as they are "submerged" (2014: 221). Still, Robinson argues, *we feel its effect*, which is somewhat similar to the 'effect' of the monster from the previous chapter, that is, the effect of something deferred, something lurking in the depths of the abyss. Unseen and silent.

6.

"There be dragons on the Internet, in the Deep Web …"

… blogger Bob Morris warns (2013). He adds an old mariner's map complete with ships and dragons to his blog-post, bringing together the dragons of the Deep Web and the depths and dangers of uncharted waters.

The Deep Web is the part of the world wide web that is not indexed by search engines, meaning that for example a Google search will not bring up Deep Websites. Examples of such sites are "user databases, webmail pages, registration-required web forums, and pages behind paywalls" (Egan 2015), that is, sites that are not supposed to be available to all users of the web. A further aspect of the Deep Web is the so-called Dark Net or Dark Web, which is a collection of sites that can be visited, yet are deliberately hidden from casual web-surfers. In order to find Dark Net sites, one needs to know where one is going, and one usually needs a special browser, such as The Onion Router (TOR), which allows web-users to surf while mostly anonymous. Due to the anonymity, the Dark Net has gained a reputation for being a haven for drug-dealers, paedophiles, hitmen and other criminals, and since the Deep Web is the umbrella term for all non-searchable websites, it, too, has gained a disturbing reputation. This has turned the Dark Net and the Deep Web into somewhat mysterious terrains, often imagined as generally dangerous and unexplored, at least by everyday users of the web.

It was the 'darkness' and unexplored nature of the deepest parts of the web that made journalist Jamie Bartlett want to do research on the Dark Net. "My primary aim was to shine a light on a world that is frequently discussed, but rarely explored" (2015: ix), he says, referring to how this as yet secretive terrain is "little understood. In reality, few people have ventured into the darker recesses of the net to study these sites in any detail" (2015: 3). His journey, as he calls it (2015: 4), took him into a seemingly bottomless abyss of knowledge:

> Every time I thought I'd reached the bottom of one online culture, I discovered
> other connected, secretive realms still unexplored … Although an increasingly
> important part of many people's lives and identities, these online spaces are
> mostly invisible: out of reach and out of view. So I went in search for them. (2015:
> 4)

Bartletts's engagement with the Dark Net evokes some of the same cultural imaginaries of exploration and conquest that can be found in narratives of the etheric ocean. *The ether was its own ocean, at once vast and diffuse, that beckoned explorers to navigate its unfathomable depths,* Sconce wrote in a previous quote. Here, it seems that it is the web that is vast and diffuse, unfathomable in its depths, while somehow promising answers and knowledge.

"There's … the small hope of finding something great and secret, like conspiracy hints or secrets to life," kuii, a user on the message-board 4chan/x/, says about the Deep Web,[90] and on the technology blog Technology Personalized, the editor Radu Tyrsina writes: "We are used to believe that what we see represents the ultimate truth. But, in many cases, what we see is only the tip of the iceberg, the bigger part being hidden or hard to discover" (2013), suggesting yet again that there is truth hidden in invisible depths or, to refer back to Blackman, in invisible registers. These 'secrets to life' that are hidden below the surface seem, however, to be constantly pushed just *out of reach and out of view*, as Bartlett puts it. Like Cecil's important message, knowledge hidden in the depths of the web is deferred through an abyssal void, an unfathomable etheric ocean. The Deep Web sends travellers away on an impossible search for truths hidden at its deepest level, often finding that they have returned to where they began: the surface web.

"[T]o be honest, all the gore you'll find [in the Deep Web] is pretty much what you can find in sites you can access through google, if you look hard enough and know where to look," a 4chan/x/ user says. "There's lots of BULLSHIT thrown around when it comes to the Deep Web. People make up stories."[91] Another user

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[90] 4chan/x/paranormal (2013). Time-stamp: 2013.02.28, 05:22:18, No.12105581.
[91] 4chan/x/paranormal (2013). Time-stamp: 2013.02.28, 10:35:22, No.12107104.

agrees, saying: "i have [been to the Deep Web], it's not all it's cracked up to be unless you go to the DEEP DEEP web, but you'll never get there anyway".[92] The truth promised in the depth of the web is deferred, one has to travel deeper and deeper – and never get there anyway. In this deferral there is a paradoxical sense of both movement and standing still, of reaching a threshold that cannot be crossed - aporia. In other words, the Deep Web seems to foil the explorer's attempts to colonise[93] its depths, instead turning that which was deep into surface, and that which was surface into depth. As Appelbaum reminds us: if there is nothing outside of text, there is "nothing likewise *inside* of the text" (2009: ix. Emphasis in original). Perhaps the deepest, darkest voids of the Deep Web are never as far away as the traveller thinks? Perhaps, considering how the void is liquid *nothing*, it has overflown its boundaries and already transgressed the explorer without her noticing, somehow contaminating her? Or, as a user on 4chan/x/ asks: "Will I get a virus? I heard there are lots of virusses".[94] On the blog Girls Who Like Dragons, blogger Harlow Clark issues a warning: "There are hackers GALORE. If you go [to the Deep Web], download nothing, and tape over your webcam. Seriously. Also, don't be stupid enough to actually buy anything" (Clark 2012).

There is a certain 'wonder' and 'apprehension', to use Sconce's words, in the encounter with the Deep Web, not least concerning the risk that it may not be possible to control the Deep Web's flows and streams, those liquid voids that may enter your body – like juice from an O.J. glass or the stream of a strange consciousness – and transport you *elsewhere*. There is *something* lurking in the depths; *something* that may look back at you from an invisible register. Suddenly lack lacks, and the monsters of the deep are too close for comfort, demanding that *the subject erase its borders, handing itself over to it in an unconditional manner*, as Harari puts it. How might one respond to such a demand?

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[92] 4chan/x/paranormal (2013). Time-stamp: 2013.02.28, 04:43:13, No.12105385.
[93] It would have been interesting to do a postcolonial critique of the colonisation of the (digital) void, but I have chosen not to do so here. I am, however, referring indirectly to such a critique from time to time throughout the chapter.
[94] 4chan/x/paranormal (2013). Time-stamp: 2013.02.28, 05:30:29, No.12105626.

I would here like to turn to a ghost-story that went viral during the summer of 2014: the story of Emily and Nathan, another pair of lovers simultaneously separated and connected by a vast void. Though not a story about the Deep Web, I argue that it taps into the same imaginary of the depths and dangers of a digital, etheric ocean.

7.
hello

"My dead girlfriend keeps messaging me on Facebook. I've got the screenshots. I don't know what to do",[95] Nathan writes, posting several images and screenshots of Facebook conversations between himself and his girlfriend, Emily, to the Reddit forum No Sleep. At this point, Nathan's girlfriend, Emily, has been dead for 13 months. Nathan explains that Emily was a technophile, which is why he decided not to memorialise her Facebook account.[96] Instead, he kept it open in order to write her messages. One day, Emily replies, saying: *hello*.[97] While Nathan desperately tries to find out who might have hacked Emily's Facebook account or alternatively what kind of virus could have infected it, Emily becomes more eloquent. She forms sentences based on the copying and pasting of previous messages, both her own and Nathan's, saying:

> Why are you doing this?
> we should make our own jam
> jfc Samantha :/

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[95] *My dead girlfriend keeps messaging me on Facebook* (2014).
[96] When a Facebook account is memorialized, it is still possible to read the information shared by the deceased. It is also possible to share notes on the person's timeline, but no one can actually log into the account, and Facebook will not be suggesting this person to others as a possible friend nor will it inform others of the person's birthday. See: https://en-gb.facebook.com/help/103897939701143 Last accessed: April 2016.
[97] *My dead girlfriend keeps messaging me on Facebook* (2014).

nah different

no chance of passing

no chance of passing

how many?

garage side door

side

I*

no chance of passing

baked beans on toast

I dunno. I just said 'yo ask Nathan'

Nathan'

Nathan'

Nathan

(*My dead girlfriend keeps messaging me on Facebook* [2014])

Finally she writes "ust [sic] let me walk",[98] which is when Nathan decides to memorialize her account; Emily was killed in a car-crash that severed her legs from her body. Even if she had survived the crash, she would never have been able to walk on her own legs again.

The story of Nathan and Emily went viral during the summer of 2014. It seems as if the idea of someone or something taking over a social media account was not completely alien to the people copying and pasting the tale, gleefully announcing its (possible) authenticity.[99] *Human clients on the network cannot see the submerged, agential, autonomous capacity for control,* Robinson wrote in the previous quote, and continued: *but we feel its effect* (2014: 221). *Something* may well hide in the invisible registers of the digital, in the *nothing* of the void, calling

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[98] *My dead girlfriend keeps messaging me on Facebook* (2014).

[99] "Even if it's a hoax (saying it right now) it's a very engaging albeit creepy read," Mark Shrayber wrote at Jezebel (2014). "Yeah, he's probably making it up, but that didn't stop the story from freaking out the internet," Rossalyn Warren wrote at BuzzFeed (2014). Finally, Snopes – a website dedicated to debunking hoaxes and rumours – did an entry on the story, explaining that it was a text from the Reddit forum No Sleep and therefore intended to sound authentic, while still being a piece of fiction (Snopes 2014). For more on hoaxes, see Chapter Five: A Trick and Corrections.

out – silently – demanding a reply. Hello … hello … hello, Emily writes, using what was originally a nautical greeting that was made popular in the 1880s when it became the proper way of answering the phone. In other words, Emily's greeting evokes the nautical roots of wireless technology, and she may well be as fluid, flowing and boundless as the streams she uses to contact Nathan. She says:

> Please stop
>
> I don't know what's happening
>
> Nathan
>
> I don't know what's happening
>
> I*
>
> I*
>
> - 12
>
> - 15
>
> my jumper's in the dryer and it's really cold out ☹
>
> really cold out
>
> cold
>
> cold
>
> Nathan
>
> please stop
>
> I*
>
> cold
>
> FRE EZIN G
>
> I don't know what's happening
>
> ('My dead girlfriend keeps messaging me on Facebook' [2014])

Emily's 'I' has an asterisk, which is typically applied after a word when using search engines, to suggest that one is interested in finding variations on that word.[100] It is

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[100] On a different use of the asterisk: Within transgender studies and activism, trans* indicates a variety of gender identities and sexual orientations (Tompkins 2014. I am grateful to Marie-Louise Holm for talking to me about the usages of the asterisk within trans studies as well as suggesting I read Tompkins). In this context, the concept of *passing* becomes a question of whether one is being recognized as the gender(s) one identifies as.

also used to correct spelling errors and typos during online communication. In that connection, the asterisk is typically situated in front of the correction. An example could be typing *your* and then correcting it in the next message with a **you're*. In this sense, Emily's *I** becomes an *I* in emergence, something to be unfolded as well as something suggested as a correction.[101] It is, in other words, not a bounded, finite 'I', nothing whole and proper. Instead, it may be a fragmented self considering how Emily, her legs missing, is indeed a *corps morcelé*; a body created through the encounter with the boundless void, whether this is the void of the land of the dead or the void of tele-technology. She seems potentially contagious through this boundlessness, 'infecting' Nathan with her difficulties to write; the last comment he posts on No Sleep is a strange ramble, which according to some of the commenters consists of copied and pasted words and sentences from his previous messages, including a direct quote (marked with italics):[102]

> I should be scared. I've occasionally opened a heart.
> just fucked up It's very not me
> *She's more real to me*
> in that state
> (*My dead girlfriend keeps messaging me on Facebook* [2014]. From comments-section.)

Interestingly, in Nathan's copy/paste message the word 'just' appears with the 'J' intact, whereas the J was missing from Emily's. This fragmented and assembled j/ust is something I will return to in my discussion of an ethics of the void, not least as justice to come. First, however, I would like to stay with the question of coldness and the inability to pass that Emily brings up.

Analysing Emily's *no chance of passing* as well as the asterisk-'I' within a trans studies framework would have been very interesting, but beyond the scope of this text.
On another, different take on passing, see also Ingvil Hellstrand's (2015) work on science fiction and nonhumans passing as human.
[101] For more on 'corrections', see Chapter Five: A Trick.
[102] Quotes on Reddit appear within a box, the font-size a little smaller. It does not say where the quote is from.

8.

FRE EZIN G. Icebergs and arctic oceans.

According to Cecil, the void is a cold, arctic ocean that swallows the warmth and light of an ember thrown into its darkness. Emily, too, evokes coldness and ice when communicating with Nathan from the void. "[M]y jumper's in the dryer and it's really cold out ☹," she says, continuing:

> really cold out
>
> cold
>
> cold
>
> Nathan
>
> please stop
>
> I*
>
> cold
>
> FRE EZIN G
>
> I don't know what's happening
>
> (*My dead girlfriend keeps messaging me on Facebook* [2014])

FRE EZIN G – a word made of somewhat deferred letters, creating little voids that are silent but visible, like the ghost 'a' of *différance*, perhaps - is the first word that Emily has not copied and pasted from other messages, suggesting that there is something at stake with this word, stitched together by copied letters and void.

The tales of the Deep Web are haunted by coldness and ice, too. Writing on her adventures in the deep, Clark says:

> I have plunged into the Deep Web … I wanted to find some of the crazy, scary stuff like what you hear about on all of those paranormal forums, like TsalalNet … And, of course, the infamous Marianas Web, which everyone knows probably doesn't really exist. ...OR DOES IT? ... probably not. Most of this is just stories, like

the rumors that there are 8 levels to the Deep Web, and the 8th is controlled by a monster AI formed from all of the AIs dumped on the internet in the past forty years. If it is real, though? Wow, what an adventure! (Clark 2012)

TsalalNet[103] is a creepypasta that primarily circulates on Deep Web message-boards. It is most likely named after the fictive Tsalal Island from Jules Verne's two volume novel *An Antarctic Mystery* from 1897. The novel tells the story of explorers, who one day come across a corpse floating on an iceberg. The dead man holds a note saying that some of the crew along with the captain of his ship have survived the shipwreck and are at Tsalal Island. When the explorers reach the island, however, it has been wrecked by earthquake and the islanders infected and killed by a rabid dog. The TsalalNet creepypasta itself does not engage directly with Verne's story, but the name still evokes a sense of discovery, dangerous depths, messages from the dead and coldness.

It is not only TsalalNet that references arctic oceans and icebergs. Indeed, considering how the world wide web is often imagined and mapped out as an ocean with a surface web and a deep web, maps of the Deep Web tend to use the image of an iceberg to illustrate the depths of this ocean. An example of such a map can be found in Tyrsina's article on the Deep Web. Yet another iceberg-map uses the exact same image as Tyrsina, yet with a void of darkness lurking below.[104] The darkness is divided into levels, the final one being Mariana's Web, which is another of the Deep Web legends mentioned by Clark and most likely named after the deepest part of the oceans, the Mariana Trench. As a user of 4chan/x/ puts it: "It's the deepest, darkest depth of the internet. A lot of foul things lurk there".[105] The map itself states – applying a homophobia typical of 4chan, suggesting that the map

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[103] Even though the TsalalNet creepypasta is fairly short, I have decided not to include it in this chapter, since it describes violence against women, children and animals, and I do not engage in an in-depth critical discussion of it. The pasta can be found here: Clark 2012 and 4chan/x/paranormal 2013.

[104] Author unknown. Year unknown. 'Things You Didn't Know about Internet (the Deep Web)'.

[105] 4chan/x/paranormal. Time-stamp: 2013.02.28, 04:54:19, No.12105443.

may well have been created there – that "[t]he day you get here, is the day OP[106] is no longer a faggot," echoing the previous 4chan/x/ user quoted above: *it's not all it's cracked up to be unless you go to the DEEP DEEP web, but you'll never get there anyway*. In other words, in spite of the various iceberg-maps, the explorer may still be struggling to find her way while suspended in the abyssal void of a digital, etheric ocean.

The sense of depth when it comes to the world wide web may be due to the experience of invisible systems, hidden just beneath the interface, both incredibly close and terribly far away. These systems are the absences that make the presence of the world wide web possible. But why is this abyssal depth of a digital etheric ocean mapped out as an iceberg? Why the coldness? And why is Emily's void-filled word FRE EZIN G?

9.

no chance of passing. **Freezing flows and the halting of movement.**

The event that might be haunting the many tales of ice and arctic waters is the sinking of the *Titanic* in 1912. The *Titanic* had been hailed as a symbol of the technological capabilities of human beings to tame the void of the sea, not least through the use of wireless technology. As it hit an iceberg, however, the crew only managed to reach one other nearby ship when calling for help. At the same time, wireless technology was used to cover the news of the tragedy, doing what tele-communication does best: cross the void and bring it into the living room, dripping with the traces of the distant and the dead. Sconce describes the image that was left in the wake of the disaster, as it was painted *by* telecommunication *about* telecommunication:

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[106] OP is short for 'original post(er)'. It refers to the person, who starts a message-board thread, or the first post in a thread.

> [T]he Titanic … imprint[ed] on the mind's eye the image of unfortunate souls spread across *the icy void of the Atlantic*, struggling to stay above the surface. Above this tragic scene, in turn, hovered the eerie ocean of wireless, which had provided the agonizingly immediate account of the catastrophe even as it powerfully reiterated the gulf separating sender and receiver, victim and savior. (Sconce 2000: 74. Emphasis added)

The sinking of the Titanic meant that wireless tele-technology was increasingly imagined as something somewhat sinister. It became associated with indifference and the mediation of misery taking place so far away that nothing could be done about it, except passive witnessing. *Looking up I see only the stars, and the void, all a little closer than they were before*, Cecil says. *All still so un-reachably distant*.

As previously mentioned, the void of Night Vale is cold, dark and associated with an arctic ocean that swallows light and warmth, and, like the iceberg that sank Titanic, the void of Night Vale is indifferent to human existence. "[T]he *Titanic* was quickly laid low by a simple iceberg, a supreme human achievement utterly destroyed by the elemental forces of nature", Sconce explains (2000: 72). The iceberg and the arctic ocean halt the movement of the human explorer by crashing the ship of the cybernetes and opening up an abyss, that is, a cold void where there should have been ground to walk on. Coldness also, however, carries with it the spectre of halted movement through petrifaction. As Blackman explains, referring to the metaphor of the flow: "As well as being a very energetic relational model, it is also rather elemental. A flow is often countered to all those elemental processes which cause petrifaction" (Blackman 2013: 68). Here, the flow is countered to petrifaction, but – as ice shows – what flows may at some point *freeze*.

The indifference towards the human, as well as the halting of movement, is why the void could be considered an 'ethically bankrupt character' within the framework of a humanist moralism that first of all centres on human

exceptionalism, for example in the form of the proud gait of the biped explorer and coloniser. The void as ice and cold, arctic ocean removes the ground from underneath the two feet of the human traveller, creating an abyss where there is no clear outside nor inside, no absolute surface and no definite final depth where answers may be found. There is violence, vulnerability and risk in this freezing abyss - but there is also a resistance to the penetrative movement of the human explorer and his 'techno-erotic touch'. Perhaps this resistance points towards a possible relational ethics of the abyssal void that is not about control and containment, but openness towards invisible registers full of darkness and non-human agency? This would not be an ethics of the capable cybernetes, who steers depths in order to spread light and disperse the ghosts - as was part of Bartlett's project, for example - nor would it be an ethics of rights and duties that aim to put the ground safely back underneath the feet of the biped explorer. Instead, it would be an ethics of the abyssal void where one lingers – anxiously - suspended in aporia, a *corps morcelé* without the need of feet in order to move: *no chance of passing*. *FRE EZIN G.*

Engaging with Heidegger's use of the abyss as a divide between 'man' and 'animal', Astrid Schrader suggests that the unfathomable and bottomless is not necessarily about relativism and nihilism, nor merely a means of distinguishing one ontological entity from another, but instead a way to engage with an ethics of relationality. "[A]n abyssal relationship to the other [is] abyssal in the sense of bottomless or groundless (infinite and without ground or beginning)", she explains. It "retains a secret that unhinges the present. Abyssal intimacy … describes a creative engagement that relies on the withdrawal of the self, a passivity that enables an active listening, an opening to surprises" (2015: 673). In other words, the abyssal relation moves the subject beyond an immediate sense of presence – it unhinges the present - asking that she listens, waiting for that which will surprise her. As such, the movement of aporia does not happen *in* time, but *beyond* the moment and the instant. It takes place as that which disturbs and interrupts, that is, as the workings of the absent – here in the shape of a secret – within presence.

According to Derrida, whose work Schrader draws upon, the movement of aporia may also be understood as:

> the difficult or the impracticable, here the impossible, passage, the refused, denied, or prohibited passage, indeed the nonpassage, which can in fact be something else, the event of a coming or of a future advent … which no longer has the form of the movement that consists in passing, traversing or transiting. It would be the 'coming to pass' of an event that would no longer have the form or the appearance of a *pas*: in sum, a coming without *pas*. (1993: 8. Emphasis in original)

With *pas*, Derrida refers to the French word, which means both *not* and *step*, turning it into a non/step. Aporia, in other words, is that which comes to be without the movement of the step, without the rhythm of human feet and without trajectory, as Schrader puts it. Indeed, aporia suspends the subject in a "zone of indeterminacy" where she is "hesitating, slowing down, not exactly knowing what to do, confused, listening intensely to what might still be hidden" (Schrader 2015: 683). This slowing down moves the self, but not in a linear fashion towards a final destination. Instead, this is a movement that does not "prompt us to immediate (re)action, literal movement, as if we already knew in advance what would be the right thing to do" (Schrader 2015: 683). In other words, this is not the movement of Charles Ess' cybernetes, who to some extent can predict what will happen. Instead, it may be understood as the undoing of that ideal human subject – the expert cybernetes – and the emergence of the fragmented self, the non/step of the *corps morcelé* caught in anxious aporia, listening intensely without knowing exactly what she is listening for. It is in this slowing down that the self may come to a halt long enough to respond as *something* reaches out of *nothing*, demanding absolute hospitality - perhaps in the form of a restored *j/ustice*.

10.

Deep and grave. On *j/ustice*.

One of the images uploaded by Nathan shows him standing in front of an open door.[107] What appears to be a monstrous, heart-shaped face with sharp teeth stares back from out of the darkness. Emily has tagged herself between the face and the phone hanging on the wall (*hello*). The 'tag-square' that is supposed to frame her face frames only the door and the wall. *ust let me walk*, she writes in one of her messages, and: *no chance of passing*. Emily's (imagined) body is fragmented, and she has halted, FRE EZIN G, reaching out to Nathan, asking him to *ust let her walk*. In other words, it is not just her body that is fragmented, but her words, too, as she has been swallowed by the void, this other from outside the symbolic order. She calls from this void, but silently, perhaps from within the gaps and absences in FRE E ZIN G. She seems to be demanding something of Nathan, but what? A voice? J/ustice?

Writing on deconstruction and responsibility, David Appelbaum argues that "[d]econstruction opens the door to an other time, a temporal alterity. Here, the frame of the metalanguage is bent in the shape of the ethical: the command to risk the responsibility to face the open door. It is the deepest, most grave of responsibilities …" (2009: ix). I find it interesting that it is the words 'deep' and 'grave' that Appelbaum uses to discuss the ethical responsibility of facing the open door. In the case of Nathan, it does indeed seem to be both the invisible, agential depths of the web that reach out to disturb him, while it is also the depths of the grave from whence his girlfriend might have returned, a *revenant*. These 'grave depths' that she calls from, threaten him with absorption and contamination, an overflowing of boundaries as the stain of the void spreads and the threshold of the self is renegotiated through the corrections and unfolding of the asterisk. Eventually, Nathan does indeed seem to become absorbed, as he heads out to open the garage door and is not heard from again until his last copy/pasted message that

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[107] *My dead girlfriend keeps messaging me on Facebook* – picture (2014).

I referenced earlier. In this message, he writes that he has 'opened a heart', suggesting that he may have entered beyond the open door in which a heart-shaped face could be glimpsed. *Just fucked up It's very not me*, he continues, writing out the word that Emily could not: *just* (let me walk).

"To be just: beyond the living present in general …" Derrida writes. "A spectral moment, a moment that no longer belongs to time, if one understands by this word the linking of modalized presents (past present, actual present: "now," future present)" (2011: xix). In disrupting the now and the immediate presence with her spectral responses, Emily may be asking for justice as absolute hospitality, demanding that Nathan gives himself to the void completely, entering the open door with its heart and its teeth, a hungry mouth and body waiting to disrupt his sense of wholeness and boundedness. Now … now … yes, *now* Nathan believes in ghosts, and his own words take the shape of copypasta, which brings the *now* of past messages into the *now* of present messages. This spectral *now* travels through an im/possible future, as the readers of Nathan's story are left to wonder if perhaps – just perhaps – they might be next. *Who was to say something worse would not come for me if I did as the creature asked?* Mary E. says, and Cecil seems to agree: *What might be coming towards us from out of the distance?*

The *now* of Emily and Nathan keeps unfolding, opening a virtual void, an abyssal relation that is boundless, without origin and without end. In this abyss, the important message keeps travelling, deferred, haunting nothingness, appearing only as repetition *that will seem to you imperceptibly but unshakably different … although you will never be able to explain why*, as Cecil warned while suspended in the cold Nightvalian void. The message remains a secret, as Schrader says that it must, in order to preserve the abyss and 'unhinge the present', thereby opening up towards a beyond the moment, a beyond the instant. In order to respond to this *beyond*, Schrader argues, one must linger, hesitate, come to a halt in front of the open door and listen – even, no, *especially* if all one can hear is 'nothing': *I hear no hum of jets, I– I see no intern, just … an open door. And an empty glass, and a spreading stain.*

In this chapter, I have argued for an ethics of the abyssal void. Rather than understanding the void as 'ethically bankrupt', I have mapped out a relational ethics of the haunted depths of not least digital voids, where hidden, invisible underbellies seem to harbour *something* rather than *nothing*. By standing still – sometimes in the grips of a tense, anxious aporia – one may be able to turn towards the virtual unfoldings and openness of the void, responding to the disruptions of the *Abgrund* as it pulls the ground away from underneath the traveller's feet, suspending her in the abyss. As such, an ethics of the abyssal void is not without risk, as the very threshold between self and other is renegotiated.

Before moving on, I would like to return to where I began: in Night Vale. Here, Carlos – before he was lost in the Desert Otherworld and before he became Cecil's partner – has attempted to delve into the depths of an underground civilization. He does so in the name of science, performing Haraway's so-called techno-erotic touch, yet fails horribly and almost gets himself killed. When he makes it back to the surface, he contacts Cecil, who asks: "What is it? … Wha– what danger are we in? What mystery needs to be explored?" Carlos replies: "*Nothing* … after everything that happened…I just wanted to see you".[108] Carlos' reply may be understood to mean that there are no dangers and no more mysteries to explore, but it may also be taken to mean that it is in *nothing* that danger and exploration are to be found. And in the risky encounter with *nothing*, time and space are disturbed:

> Carlos looked at the setting sun. "I used to think it was setting at the wrong time," he said, "but then I realized that time doesn't work in Night Vale, and that none

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[108] *Welcome to Night Vale*, episode 25: *One Year Later* (2013). 27:29 – 27:46.

of the clocks are real. Sometimes things seem so strange, or malevolent, and then you find that, underneath, it was something else altogether …"

… Carlos and I sat on the trunk of that car – his car – looking together at the lights up in the sky above the Arby's … they were beautiful in the hushed twilight, shimmering in a night sky already coming alive with bits of the universe.

One year later. One year since he arrived. He put his hand on my knee and said *nothing*. And I knew what he meant. I felt the same. I leaned my head on his shoulder.

We understand the lights. We understand the lights above the Arby's. We understand *so much.*

But the sky behind those lights – mostly void, partially stars? That sky reminds us we *don't* understand even more.

(*Welcome to Night Vale*, episode 25: *One Year Later* [2013]. 28:06 – 30:53. Emphasis added)

Carlos' attempt to gain scientific understanding failed. He did not succeed in mapping out the hidden, invisible depths and finally understand *everything*. Instead, he went astray and found *nothing* and from this *nothing* – this not-knowing – *something* happened; a queered techno-erotic touch, perhaps, that disturbs the homophobic and goal-oriented 4chan-map over Mariana's Web.

I don't know what's happening, Emily writes, pointing towards the uncertainty and undecidability of the void. This is an uncertainty and undecidability that cannot be solved by applying traditional scientific methods, as Carlos discovered. The effects of the nothing of the void can, however, be felt: *[he] said nothing. I felt the same*. The effect of the abyssal void is a reminder *that we do not understand even more*, and it is this impossibility of a fully present, immediate and knowable world that makes the arrival of the radically different - and of j/ustice - possible.

CHAPTER FOUR
The Smile

1.

Do you believe in a Smiling God?

"Are you achieving your fullest potential?" the radio-host asks, continuing:

> Are you finding the right solutions for your challenges? Are you making the most of what you're given? Do you believe in a Smiling God?
>
> Of course you do! We all do. We must!
>
> Well, what if I told you the Smiling God was smiling more than ever? What if the Smiling God had a smile so wide that you could see yourself in its mirrored teeth?
>
> And what if I told you that your gauzy reflection looked perfect – just perfect?
>
> You would like that. Of course! We *all* would. We must!
>
> And what if I told you your perfect self *hated* your imperfect self? And as the Smiling God smiled wider, you could see a tongue pressing through the teeth – thick, and pink, and gray, and wet.
>
> And what if I told you you could *see* your imperfect self in the shining sheen of the bulging tongue?
>
> And in your reflection you were slack and sallow? And maybe bleeding. A lot. Bleeding *so much*!
>
> And what if I told you you could *kill* your imperfect self?
>
> What if I told you you *could* achieve your fullest potential?
>
> StrexCorp Synernists Inc. is a proud supporter of the greater Desert Bluff and Night Vale community.
>
> StrexCorp. Believe in a Smiling God.
>
> Believe in your perfect self.
>
> Strex.
>
> Strex.
>
> (*Welcome to Night Vale*. Episode 43: *Visitor* [2014]. 17:05 -18:58)

Kevin the radio-host is Cecil's doppelganger; they look alike, except for Kevin's blood-smeared clothes and seemingly missing eyes and constant smile. Via the medium of radio, they also both wonder about the void. Whereas Cecil ends up concluding that the void *reminds us that we don't understand even more* - which means that one must linger in the abyss, in the company of the ghosts that haunt the threshold between self and other - Kevin suggests a different company; the business company of StrexCorp Synernists Inc. StrexCorp worships the Smiling God that will *kill your imperfect self*, this self that is *slack and sallow and maybe bleeding. A lot. Bleeding so much.* This is a self that is reflected in the mirror of the Smiling God's tongue, suggesting that what the subject sees here is the imperfect, fragmented body, the *corps morcelé* where the ideal, unitary body should have been. In other words, 'you' who gaze into the smile of the Smiling God may be in the clutches of anxious aporia, at the threshold of the void of the other that threatens to overflow and contaminate, disrupting the perfect unity and self-presence of the subject. This imperfect self must die, Kevin argues. The *corps morcelé* must be done away with in order for the perfect self reflected in the teeth of the smile to thrive. Rather than stay in the company of ghosts, 'you' who has killed your imperfect self can stay in the company of the company StrexCorp Synernists Inc. Do not believe in ghosts, no: here, *now*, yes, now *believe in a Smiling God. Believe in your perfect self.*

In this chapter, I will be going into more detail about the question of companionship, this time as a matter of following a guide, someone who – like a *vade mecum* – walks *with* you, showing the way, sometimes not in an outwards direction, but as a bodily transgression. I will do so through the figure of the smile. I find it interesting that – without my planning it to be so – three of the main stories of this text all in some way or another engage with the smile: there is Smile.dog, grinning across time and space and digital media; Kevin, the smiling radio-host; and then there is *Mushroom Land TV* with its *Smile Guide*. It is this *Smile Guide* – along with Kevin and his promises of perfection - that I will take as my guides here, asking:

why do monsters smile? And how and why does one follow a ghostly companion – a *vade mecum*?

2.

"Watch me smile!" The visor effect and hidden smiles.

"Welcome to our guide!" Agatka says, waving at us from within what appears to be a children's TV-show from the late 1980s or early 1990s. "In today's show you're going to learn how to effectively apple," she continues, before moving on to explaining the ontology of an apple: "Apple consists of upperapple, mushroomland and paper",[109] she says. Agatka then picks up a knife and begins to hollow out an apple, but her demonstration is interrupted by the silhouette of a woman – seemingly Agatka's mother - who speaks in a distorted voice, saying: "Kids at school simply told her that she will be taken … At night at midnight, that's what they told her … and to take a warm sweater along".[110] Emily seems to be haunting these words: *my jumper's in the dryer and it's really cold out* ☹

> *really cold out*
>
> *cold*
>
> *cold*
>
> *cold*
>
> *FRE EZIN G*

Whereas Emily illustrates the coldness she experiences through an unhappy 'smiley-face', Agatka, however, remains loyal to the smile. Dressed in a 'warm sweater', she keeps on working on her apple, her TV-show seemingly promising that one will smile at the end of it, if only one follows her example.

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[109] *Mushroom Land TV/Smile Guide*. Episode 1. *How effectively apple* (2013). 00:10 – 00:42.

[110] Mushroom *Land TV/Smile Guide*. Episode 1. *How effectively apple* (2013). 01:24 – 01:39.

Kevin the eye-less and blood-covered monster promises the same thing: "it's hard to smile when there's no working!" he says. "And if we aren't smiling, then what value do we have? Watch me smile!"[111] It is, however, difficult for the listeners of *Welcome to Night Vale* to *watch* Kevin smile. Instead, the listeners are introduced to a short pause – which is filled with laughter, as the audience watches something the listeners cannot see[112] - before Cecil exclaims with horror and disgust: "You monster!"[113] This silent, invisible smile is apparently dreadful – as well as funny - to behold, but one cannot know. It exists in what I - referencing Lisa Blackman from the previous chapter (2013: 27) - would call an 'invisible register' of the digital media that is the podcast, deferred as Cecil's important message through the abyssal void. All the listener hears is the effect of this smile: *you monster!*

In contrast to Kevin, Agatka is a host who can be seen, yet this does not seem to make her – or the smile – any more of an immediate presence. On the contrary, her movements are troubled, her demonstrations constantly interrupted by surreal glimpses of seemingly unrelated footage, the sound sometimes too loud, sometimes too low. It is also impossible to look her in the eyes. Or, at least in her 'real' eyes, for Agatka wears images of eyes that have been glued across what may or may not be her 'actual' eyes, providing an unblinking stare as she addresses her viewers, telling them what to do. "Check if she's breathing," a text says. "Her eyes are so soft."[114] Considering how Agatka seems to be talking to her viewers from a place not that dissimilar to Emily's cold void – Mushroom Land is a place where one needs a sweater, and where immediacy and presence are constantly deferred - this is not bad advice: *check if she's breathing. Her eyes are so soft*. For the sake of anonymity, readers were never allowed to see Emily's eyes, either, as they were blocked out. Now, both Emily and Agatka watch their readers and their viewers from behind a 'visor', staring out from a cold void, possibly suspended between the land of the living and the land of the dead. A place where viewers send fan-mail to

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[111] *Welcome to Night Vale*. Episode 49. *Old Oak Doors Part B* (2014). 06:55 – 07:05.
[112] *Old Oak Doors* was a live performance, recorded for the podcast.
[113] *Welcome to Night Vale*. Episode 49. *Old Oak Doors Part B* (2014). 07:17 – 07:20.
[114] *Mushroom Land TV*/Smile Guide. Episode 1. *How effectively apple* (2013). 3:25 – 3:28.

Agatka that read: "Dear Monika, for your 8th deathday we wish all your dreams to come true. Late grandma Józefa with family". [115] And: "Happiness and sweets for Karolek from Bielsko, your silly aunt Irene. P.S. For God's sake, she can't breathe, call an".[116] This last, important message is never finished. Maybe it will arrive later, like Cecil's message, or maybe it will forever exist only as a fragmented sentence whose ending is arranged and rearranged in the mind of the reader.

As spectres – possibly speaking from beyond the grave - Kevin and Agatka are hard to see and their messages hard to piece together to form a complete picture. Yet, even though they are difficult *to see* does not mean that they have difficulties *seeing*. Who is to say at whom, where and even *when* Agatka is really looking, her eyes deferred, suggesting that beneath the paper eyes there may be more paper eyes under which there may be even more paper eyes – *tigers within tigers within tigers*. Repetition without origin and repetition without end, all deferring and making invisible what may or may not be Agatka's 'real' gaze. She might be watching us from nowhere and everywhere at once right … *now*.

The spectre, Derrida argues, does not belong to knowledge, at least not to traditional western understandings of knowledge that values a reality that can be measured and not least *seen*. Between apparitions, the spectre cannot be seen, but it *sees*, and as such makes itself your business: "the ghost is my affair [is looking at me: *ca me regarde*]" (Derrida 2011: 177). This, the being looked at by that which cannot be looked at, is what Derrida calls the 'visor effect' (2011: 6). The visor here refers to the armour worn by Hamlet's father, as he comes back to haunt and, not least, to give orders. The armour lends shape to that which may or may not be shapeless – we do not know what is beneath the armour, if anything – and the visor makes it possible for the one wearing the armour to see while not being seen, to take the other as its affair, its object of consideration, while not being made an object of knowledge in return. This truly is the privilege of the king as a figure of power that works invisibly, taking on a shape (an armour) from time to time, only

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[115] *Mushroom Land TV/Smile Guide*. Episode 4: *How own hair* (2014). 3:25 – 3:28.
[116] *Mushroom Land TV/Smile Guide*. Episode 4: *How own hair* (2014). 3:53 – 3: 55.

to disperse afterwards, invisible between apparitions, yet watching still. The visor effect is the effect of the law, that which demands something of you without it stemming from a single, unitary figure. It is the workings of structures older than the subject itself, relations that form the subject by being prior to it, the workings of *a thing* that is both abstract and strangely specific. As such, one may follow ghosts – that is, take orders and directions from them - since they come before the subject, they stand in front of the subject and lead the way. The subject would not be able to follow anything at all, had it not been for these structures of power that it follows, which opens up a strange relation, perhaps best imagined as the paradox of conjuration, meaning the spell that both expels and calls forth, keeps out of and within sight. The words of a conjuration

> always cause to come back, they convoke the *revenant* that they conjure away. Come so that I may chase you! You hear! I chase you. I pursue you. I run after you to chase you away from here. I will not leave you alone. And the ghost does not leave its prey, namely, its hunter. It has understood instantly that one is hunting it just to hunt it, chasing it away only so as to chase after it … One sends him far away, puts distance between them, so as to spend one's life, and for as *long a time* as possible, coming close to him again. The *long time* is here the time of *this distance hunt* (a hunt *for* distance, the prey, but also a hunt *with* distance, the lure).
> (Derrida 2011: 175. Emphasis in original)

The space between hunter and prey, spectre and self, is one of uncertainty and a strange yearning for both distance and proximity, which is what makes Derrida refer to it as a 'paradoxical hunt' (2011: 175). Traditionally, it is the gaze that promises distance, knowledge and thought, yet this distance can at any time falter, since the spectre is always already within, constitutive of the hunting subject. In this sense, if the gaze promises distance, it also creates anxiety concerning the rupture of said distance, as it turns to overflowing and transgression. This is when the ideal body-image shatters and becomes the *corps morcelé* – the imperfect self that according to Kevin must be killed, for it bleeds and it sags and it keeps you from

your *full* potential. But does one want to follow Kevin's advice? What does it even mean to follow ghosts in such an anxiety-inducing, paradoxical hunt?

3.

Gravy and the grave. On following ghosts.

To Derrida, following ghosts is about an ethics of learning to live (finally), that is, a paradox(ical hunt). The word *finally* indicates a beginning (*finally*, one will begin to learn) as well as an ending (the learning is final/finite). This is the logic of hauntology – repetition and first time, repetition and last time – which holds within itself both endings and beginnings. There is no learning to live that is not taught by both life and death, Derrida argues: the life and death of oneself as well as the life and death of the other. This does not mean that learning to live (finally) is a question of finding the right route and sticking to it, moving from birth to death. Rather, learning to live (finally) is non-linear, as all haunting is, holding within itself life *and* death, not least through the act of mourning the loved other, who is yet to die, which is a point I will return to later in this chapter. This means that learning to live (finally) is about an ethics of relating to and showing responsibility towards the not quite living and the not quite dead, that is, those yet to be born, those who have been, those who could have been:

> [T]o learn to live with ghosts, in the upkeep, the conversation, the company, or the companionship, in the commerce without commerce of ghosts. To live otherwise, and better. No, not better, but more justly. But *with them* … And this being-with specters would also be, not only but also, a *politics* of memory, of inheritance, and of generations. (Derrida 2011: xvii – xviii. Emphasis in original)

Ghosts teach us how to learn to live (finally) in their company, with the debts we owe them (for language, for writing, for reading, for our names, for hunting them

to keep them close). It is the *with* that defines such companionship, the *cum*, as well as the transgressive movement of such a *with*.

Turning to etymology, Donna Haraway explains that companion derives from the Latin *cum panis*, meaning 'with bread'. "Messmates at table are companions. Comrades are political companions. A companion in literary contexts is a vade mecum or handbook, like the Oxford Companion to wine or English verse; such companions help readers to consume well," she explains (2008: 17), knotting together eating and reading. Both are consumptions, processes of internalisation that may or may not go well, for both reading and eating can cause indigestion. This means that what is internalised and absorbed cannot fully be made part of the eating/reading body, but stays strange and other, both part of and alien to the host. As feminist theorist Annemarie Mol puts it: "The eating 'I' … does not painstakingly keep its enemies at a distance, but eagerly searches for food. It hopes to absorb parts of what used to be outside it" (2008: 30). Eating troubles the distinction between self and other, good and bad, 'I' and 'you', subject and object, which is why Derrida is concerned with how to consume *well*.

In 'Eating Well' (1995), Derrida discusses the ethics of eating as a relation of responsibility and hospitality. The eating subject, he argues, has a responsibility towards that which is about to be eaten, this 'enemy' – as Mol might have put it - that is a stranger and a guest.[117] This is a responsibility towards the inherent otherness of that which is about to become consumed. Eating well, in other words, is not about how to avoid indigestion through perfect absorption: it is about staying with the tension that what one absorbs is both of and not of oneself, responding to this otherness and showing it hospitality rather than domestication, even if this causes discomfort.

The hospitality suggested by Derrida opens up to a range of other ethical concerns regarding responsibility and how one relates to the other, as well as a need to learn:

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[117] For the etymological interconnections between 'stranger', 'guest', 'host' and 'enemy', see Online Etymology Dictionary: guest (n). Link: http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=guest Last accessed: April 2016.

The infinitely metonymical question on the subject of "one must eat well" must be nourishing not only for me, for a "self," which would thus eat badly; it must be shared, as you might put it, not only in language. "One must eat well" does not mean above all taking in and grasping in itself, but learning and giving to eat, learning-to-give-the-other-to-eat. One never eats entirely on one's own: this constitutes the rule underlying the statement, "One must eat well." It is a rule offering infinite hospitality. (Derrida 1995: 282. Emphasis in original)

There is companionship – *cum panis* - in eating. One must offer the other hospitality within and give oneself to the other as the other is internalised, that is, give-the-other-to-eat. It is a relation based on an imperative, the very language of armour-clad ghosts. "Ghosts do not parse existence or existents (beings); nouns, substantives, and the nominative are not particles of their syntax," David Appelbaum explains. "On the other hand, *verbs*, *imperatives*, and especially apostrophes, abound" (2009: 40. Emphasis added). Kevin agrees, repeatedly stating: *we must!* Here, the imperative is to eat. One *must* eat, not least that which is good to eat, in the sense that it tastes good and is nourishing.[118] It is a necessity that sparks an ethical imperative as well: since one must eat, one is always already locked in a relation with the other that is both pleasurable and violent. The imperative to eat is therefore excessive, as it reaches beyond the eating self, making it part of ethical responsibility. Derrida writes: "responsibility is excessive or it is not a responsibility. A limited, measured, calculable, rationally distributed responsibility is already the becoming-right of morality …" (1995: 286). The command and imperative that one must eat well is in excess of itself. The 'order' can never be carried out completely and to perfection, for then the word would be the deed itself, fully present, no gap between word and world, nor between the one who orders and the one who follows. Much of the demand will remain within

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[118] This raises the question of an ethics of 'that which is bad to eat', for example through the subject of disgust. It is a question that would have been interesting to discuss, but I have decided not to pursue it here.

the impossible, that is, the realm of justice, where the lesson of eating well and giving the other to eat has to be learned. An order therefore calls upon the excessive, the absent presence of justice as well as the companionship of spectres and their love of imperatives and verbs.

A companion, as Haraway points out, can be a *vade mecum*, which is something small that you bring with you, often in order to consult and learn from. As previously mentioned, the word itself means 'go with me', suggesting movement as well as a following: *follow my advice* or *take me as your guide*. Walking with, moving with, eating with someone or something else, therein, I argue, lies also the learning to live (finally) with ghostly companions, but only if the *with* stays undomesticated, neither fully inside nor outside, never absorbed. The ghost needs indigestion in order to live while dead, as Ebeneezer Scrooge tells us in *A Christmas Carol* (1993 [1843]). "Why do you doubt your senses?" asks Marley, who has come back to haunt his old business companion/*cum panis*, and Scrooge replies:

> Because … a little thing affects them. A slight disorder of the stomach makes them cheats. You may be an undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese, a fragment of an underdone potato. There's more of gravy than of grave about you, whatever you are! (Dickens 1993: 24)

Consuming according to ghosts is here to consume imperfectly; to leave traces of the other that are in excess of the self and take form as shapes that haunt, simultaneously of the inside and the outside. This is the 'deep' and 'grave' responsibility towards the open door that I mentioned, citing Appelbaum, in the previous chapter; the listening for the other in aporia, where there is no clear inside and no clear outside, for it is the threshold itself that is being changed. I will return to the question of aporia later in this chapter. First, however, I would like to stay with companionship as a question of 'following'.

4.

The smile as a curse and a course.

Following, as I understand Derrida, is a concept used to discuss how the human subject does not preexist its relations. Something always came first and something comes after, a string of *nows* that do not move in an ordered or linear fashion. Moving according to such *nows* will always be done in the heels of something else, something paving the way, while one is simultaneously being followed, looked at, taken as the object of concern by something else. Ghosts are guides, spectral *vade mecums*, in such a paradoxical hunt where hunter and prey never fully meet, never fully connect, never become immediately present to one-another but stay in the anxious *with* – the tense yearning and imagining of the dance of relating. Ghosts, however, are not the only such guides.

In *The Animal that Therefore I Am* (2008), Derrida engages with the question of animals and their role within traditional western metaphysics. He is critical towards how animals are situated as the singular 'animal', a category used to oppose and create the category of 'human', which does not acknowledge differences between animals, nor the specificity of individual animals. Even more problematic: the category of animal is left outside the realm of ethical responsibility, since animals are traditionally understood to be incapable of responses, merely 'reacting' to outside stimuli according to set rules of cause and effect, as discussed in Chapter One. Writing on an encounter with his cat, a very specific cat that looked at him while he was naked, Derrida critiques this understanding of the animal, discussing how, not unlike the spectre, the animal seems to have come before the human, in order for the category of the human to exist at all. As such, the human subject follows the animal, and the animal takes the human subject as 'its affair', that is, as an object of knowledge and thought, arriving at conclusions that are invisible and unknowable to the human object. The imagined distance between human and nonhuman is therefore a brittle one: it is the gaze of the animal that stands before the human subject, leading the way, not

the other way around, which means that the animal is always already inside, a constitutive other. As in the spectral hunt *for* and *of* distance, distance and proximity are both present in the encounter between for example a naked Derrida and his small, female cat: "I often ask myself, just to see, *who I am* – and who I am (following) at the moment when, caught naked, in silence, by the gaze of the animal, for example, the eyes of a cat, I have trouble, yes, a bad time overcoming my embarrassment" (2008: 3-4. Emphasis in original). Regarding the translation of 'a bad time', originally *j'ai du mal*, translator David Wills explains in the endnotes that "the expression also evokes the sense of evil or *a curse*" (2008: 162. Emphasis added).

There is a sense of transgression in the animal's gaze, its 'evil eye', that sets out a curse – or a c(o)urse[119] - for the human subject to eat and/or follow. This is perhaps best exemplified in the case of Smile.dog, who - being a spectre and speaking in imperatives - demands that we 'spread the word' by setting out on a trajectory of copying and pasting, of never-ending contamination. In the smile, it shows its teeth, and the teeth promise transgression. They are still at a distance, but as is always the case with the paradoxical hunt, they can disrupt this distance *now* or even *NOW*. Derrida, when encountering the gaze of his cat, seems to sense the teeth in that gaze as well, saying:

> *To see*, without going to see, without touching yet, and without biting, although that threat remains on its lips or on the tip of the tongue. Something happens there that shouldn't take place – like everything that happens in the end, a lapsus, a fall, a failing, a fault, a symptom …" (2008: 4. Emphasis in original)

There is movement here, in the fall and the failing, as the eyes promise a c(o)urse, a spectral hunt where follower becomes the followed becomes the follower and the distance of the eyes turns into the transgression of teeth.

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[119] 'Curse' and 'course' are etymologically connected. See Online Etymology Dictionary: curse (n.). Link: http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=curse Last accessed: April 2016.

In spite of the reference to biting and the possible transgression as gaze turns to teeth, Derrida does not explicitly engage with the mouth in this particular text. The silence of the gaze, the mute trace of the animal, is what he is interested in here, not the silence and mute trace of the gestures of the mouth, such as the smile. Yet, if the gaze is considered the privileged site of knowledge for humans, and therefore worthy of deconstruction as the eyes of the animal are met, might this not be the case of the smile as well? What might it mean to encounter a smile on a face that is not human? Or, stranger still, what of the invisible sign, the smile behind the helmet, unseen? *Watch me smile*, Kevin says, but we cannot. All we can do is feel its effect as Cecil declares: *you monster!* To refer back to Jeffrey Cohen in Chapter One: *the effects of the monster are undeniable*. Here, the effect of the monster is the exclamation of someone else, deferring the cause – the smile itself - and hiding it in the depths of invisible registers.

It is not, however, that Derrida appears uninterested in the smile or the mouth when discussing the ethical encounter between human and animal; they both seem to haunt the text as an absent presence, situated in the margins. Like Kevin's smile, we cannot see it, it is never described. *Watch me smile!* he says, and someone watches *for* us, *with* us, perhaps, and we try to establish the meaning of the smile in the effect it has on the other – here Cecil – and from his voice create an image. All of this happens around the gaping void of the opening mouth that apparently stretches into a smile. Indeed, according to Stacy Alaimo (2013), *The Animal that Therefore I Am* is haunted by voids as depths and abysses. Discussing the reputation of the deep seas as being the voids of the voids, Alaimo writes that "Derrida's ruminations are already drenched in the language of the depths, as he describes the question of human and nonhuman subjectivity as 'immense and abyssal'" (Alaimo 2013: 232). This returns us to the question of the abyssal void as an ethical figure rather than an absolute divide.

The paradoxical hunt of conjuration, with its distances and tense awaiting and expectation of transgression, can be understood as anxiety and the non/step of aporia. Here, it is the threshold itself that is being redefined as the relation

between self and other takes shape in a hunt – or a dance of (im/possible) death – that is non-linear and does not arrive at a specific destination. This is aporia as Astrid Schrader's '*Abgrund*', the removal of ground underneath the hunter/dancer, a suspension in the abyssal void where the transgression of the other – in the shape of a demand of absolute hospitality – is something anxiously expected and imagined.

5.

Purring and growling. Call it what you like.

Whereas Alaimo points out the depths that haunt the encounter between animal and human in *The Animal that therefore I Am*, I am interested in the absent presence of the depth of the smile. Discussing the gazes of cats as mute traces, Derrida refers to Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (1993 [1865]) and not least an exchange between Alice and the Cheshire Cat. Yet, while doing so, he never goes into much detail regarding the grin of the Cat. Considering how the Cheshire Cat is first of all known for its grin, this lends a spectral presence to it that in many ways seems to fit the absent presence of the Cat's own body in Carroll's work.[120] Capable of disappearing and reappearing at will, the cat fades in and out of existence, sometimes leaving nothing but its smile behind, until it, too, disappears. Perhaps it travels the same route as intern Maureen, that is, via the void, leaving behind an empty glass, an open door and a spreading stain. Or maybe it simply turns invisible, as the spectral Cat lowers its visor.

Reaching a fork in the road while travelling Wonderland, Alice asks the Cheshire Cat for directions. She seems to know that such advice may come with a

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[120] Indeed, Carroll's work seems an absent presence in *The Animal that therefore I am* itself. "Although I don't have time to do so, I would of course have liked to inscribe my whole talk within a reading of Lewis Carroll. In fact you can't be certain that I am not doing that, for better or for worse, silently, unconsciously, or without your knowing," Derrida says (2008: 7).

transgression. At this point, there is distance between them, as the Cat sits in a tree, grinning at her, but Alice is well-acquainted with the rules of the spectral hunt where distance is merely the deferral of proximity, and eyes may turn into teeth in a heartbeat: "It looked good-natured, she thought: still it had *very* long claws and a great many teeth, so she felt that it ought to be treated with respect" (Carroll 1993: 67. Emphasis in original). *Respect*, Haraway argues, is the returning of the gaze in a response: "Respect is *respecere* – looking back, holding in regard, understanding that meeting the look of the other is a condition of having face oneself" (2008: 88. Emphasis in original). It is by returning the gaze that one gets to 'have a face', and it is in the returning of the gaze that one 'gives' the other a face as well. In this giving, the smile as a relational connection takes form, showing forth the teeth as a greeting or a warning. Or maybe both. The meaning of the smile is unstable – as Villar, Mary E. and Smile.dog might have put it - which becomes clear in the discussion that Alice and the Cat has on the differences between purring and growling:

> '[Y]ou see a dog growls when it's angry, and wags its tail when it's pleased. Now I growl when I'm pleased, and wag my tail when I'm angry. Therefore I'm mad.'[121]
> 'I call it purring, not growling,' said Alice.
> 'Call it what you like,' said the Cat.
> (Carroll 1993: 68)

Purring and growling, growling and purring – call it what you like. There is an overlap between these two sounds that may be translated into the mute trace of the grin itself, that is, a grimace that can be understood as signifying both pain, anger and pleasure as teeth are bared and inside becomes outside.

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[121] Madness is one of the most well-known and often discussed 'effects' of monsters and spectres, and Derrida briefly touches upon the issue in his engagement with the scene from *Alice in Wonderland*. Madness is, however, too rich a theme for me to pursue here in a way that would do it justice. I chose to include the Cat's conclusion in the quote, since I did not want to leave out what it names as the thing that it itself *follows after* (*therefore*, it says, thereby referencing the very title of Derrida's work [*The Animal that Therefore I Am*]).

'Grin', according to the Online Etymology Dictionary, derives from the old English 'grennian', meaning to "'show the teeth (in pain or anger)'" as well as to "'bare the teeth in a broad smile'".[122] The smile, the stretching of the face to bare the teeth, may be understood as a very human gesture, a kind one of hospitality and invitation,[123] but it simultaneously 'shatters' the face, showing how it is not static, but 'given by the other' through its relations. The smile turns the face inside out, suggesting not just the shiny surface of teeth, where Kevin's perfect self is mirrored, but also a hidden depth, pointing to Appelbaum's 'deep' and 'grave' responsibility of responding to the open door – or 'mouth', as in the case of the all-consuming abyssal void. In this 'grave' depth, the absent presence of the skull haunts. Kevin puts it well; speaking lovingly of his intern, Vanessa, he says: "Always a laugh, always a smile, a big smile! Where she'd show me all these perfect teeth, and I would just imagine the rest of her perfect skull. Funny how the skull is so visible in your mouth. Weird. Who thinks of that stuff? I don't know. Weird, right?"[124] While able to make jokes in the morning, Vanessa is nonetheless dead and has, according to Kevin, been so for many years. Her smile, however, lingers. Cecil, as much as he wishes to distance himself from his uncanny double,[125] is also enamoured by a certain smile and some very specific, grave-like teeth. When Carlos, who is later to become Cecil's romantic partner, arrives in Night Vale, it is his perfect smile and "teeth like a military cemetery"[126] that is one of the first things he notices about the scientist.

For both Kevin and Cecil, love and death are strangely interwoven in the teeth of the smile. The depths suggested by the smile, the welcoming gesture of

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[122] Online Etymology Dictionary: grin (v.). Link:
http://etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=grin&searchmode=none
Last accessed: April 2016.
[123] I am here speaking from within a western/Nordic context. The smile is not a universal gesture, yet in this part of the world it is typically understood to be a wordless, human way of communicating across for example language-barriers. I will be referring to this cultural imaginary of the smile rather than attempting to say what the smile 'really' is.
[124] *Welcome to Night Vale*. *The Debate* (2014). 43:24 – 43:48.
[125] The theme of the uncanny doppelganger lingers as an absent presence throughout this chapter. I have, however, chosen not to unpack it here, except as it relates to the smile.
[126] *Welcome to Night Vale*. Episode 1: *Pilot* (2012). 05:11 – 05:14.

love and hospitality (the purr), points towards a finality, a crypt of ghosts (the violence promised by the growl). In this sense, it is perhaps not strange that Kevin finds thinking of the smile, the teeth and the visibility of the skull in the mouth, to be *weird*, which refers to 'that which comes'.[127] Thinking of and with the visibility of the skull in the mouth, the smile points towards the becoming-skeleton of the self as well as the one receiving the smile. It is a pointing inwards as well as outwards, a doubling as skull is mirrored in skull – and doppelganger in doppelganger, as is the case with Cecil and Kevin. A *memento mori* of sorts: remember death – but whose death? What does it mean to be invited inside someone else, their bodies opening up as if to swallow you, while turning inside out? There is love in the narratives told by Kevin and Cecil, and thought. Who thinks of these things? Kevin asks, bringing a sense of uncertainty to his own position as a speaking, thinking subject, as he stands before the (imagined) skull of Vanessa, just as he has spoken the very words he now doubts he ever really thought of to begin with. If words are never fully mine, if my name is never fully mine, is the smile? The name continues after my death; language continues after my death; even my very smile, the grin of the skull, may continue long after my flesh has gone and the particular, gathered, unitary 'I', vulnerable to any changes in the relations that hold it together, has dispersed. In the weird thoughts of an always already dying speaker, the dance of relating becomes a *danse macabre*, the skull reflecting back what you will become because it is already there, invisible to the eye, except in the smile, this mute trace of something other within: the skull, the crypt, the future and the past. But it also indicates a possible depth, an abyssal void of anxiety and aporia where the other – the *arrivant* as *revenant* – may stay. A place where one may give-the-other-to-eat and where an undigested and disturbing *with* may take place.

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[127] Online Etymology Dictionary: weird (adj.). Link: http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=weird&searchmode=none Last accessed: April 2016.

6.

"You are full of mushrooms!" No outside, no inside.

Returning to Mushroom Land, the *vade mecum* seems to be a *memento mori* as well: a remembrance of death. "I remember,"[128] a text says, as a picture of Małgosia - the cartoon squirrel and co-host - is placed next to Agatka in episode four. At this point, Małgosia has seemingly been transformed into a water buffalo steak by Agatka herself – Agatka uttered the magic-spell "[b]ubalus-bubalis, a-choo",[129] followed by the close up of meat cooking on a stove - and potentially devoured. Yet, she is not gone, but writes Agatka a message, saying: "I'm in your hair forever, your Maggie".[130] She has buried a box in Agatka's scalp, and now Agatka's hair is full of itchy dandruff and grease. Images of hair and nails appear now and again, growing, as if referring to the stories of hair and nails growing after death.

Death, separation, parting and loss seem to haunt Mushroom Land – "[a]nd beware this land of mushrooms, though the sunny meadow's tempting[,] one who enters shall experience nothing but the weep and parting", an 'early 20th century poem' reads[131] - and its constantly deferred and/or badly imitated smile and laughter. But whose death and whose loss? Behind the visor, identities are difficult to discern and seem in constant movement. Who is mourning whom? Who is watching whom?

There is an excessiveness to Mushroom Land TV, for example in the way the characters seemingly address the viewers, possibly asking something of them, as Emily did of Nathan and Nathan did of the Reddit-readers. This excessiveness –

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[128] *Mushroom Land TV/Smile Guide*. Episode 4. *How own Hair* (2014). 4:42 – 4:45.

[129] *Mushroom Land TV/Smile Guide*. Episode 2. *How to make from paper* (2014). 4:07 - 4:09. 'Bubalus bubalis' is another name for the water buffalo.

[130] *Mushroom Land TV/Smile Guide*. Episode 4. *How own Hair* (2014). 4:33–4:34. 'Maggie' is Małgosia's English name. I decided to leave it in the text, since I am quoting from the English sub-titles, while referring to the characters by their Polish names. Agatka's name in English is 'Agatha'. This name will appear in quotes as well.

I am grateful to Magdalena Górska for discussing the politics of (non-English) names with me. It was this discussion that made me decide to use the Polish names, rather than their English translations. Anglophone names are well represented as it is.

[131] *Mushroom Land TV/Smile Guide*. Episode 1. *How effectively apple* (2013). 0:43 – 0:51.

a response, as Derrida might put it, since responsibility must be excessive, otherwise it is not responsibility - may be understood through the figure of the mushroom itself,[132] and how it in the 1990s became the subject of a Russian satire TV-sketch. In 1991, Russian musician Sergey Kuryokhin went on live TV, to claim that Lenin had in fact been a mushroom.[133] This was due to the infectious nature of mushrooms, he explained, pointing out two ways that mushrooms may contaminate and take over a human host: through the transgressive nature of the radio wave and through ingestion. "[M]ushrooms produce the same effect as intangible radio wave," he explains. "Putting it in simple words, mushroom is a radio wave. It is neither plant nor animal, it is a radio wave."[134] He continues, pointing out the consequences of ingesting such radio waves:

> The thing is if you start consuming fly agaric mushroom continualy [sic], your personality will be gradually replaced by fly agaric's personality. Fly agaric has its own personality. And two personalities can not exist simultaneously within one person. And fly agaric's personality is stronger than the human's one … so, the person is gradually turning into mushroom … and accordingly into a radio wave. As a whole the person transforms into a radio wave and a mushroom.
> (Kuryokhin 1991. *Lenin was a Mushroom* [part two]. 1:34 – 2:14)

The *Lenin Was a Mushroom* sketch was a humorous hoax intended to lead viewers astray. *Mushroom Land TV* also, in its own way, leads viewers astray, not least through an unnerving sense of humour and trickery. As a guide, *Smile Guide* does not move according to a linear, goal-oriented itinerary, but according to something else, something excessive and potentially infectious as one internalises its

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[132] In this chapter, I am engaging with the mushroom as part of a spectral companionship, which would have made Anna Tsing's article 'Unruly Edges: Mushrooms as Companion Species' (2012) an interesting lens with which to explore this theme. I have, however, chosen to take the mushroom in a slightly different direction – that of radio-waves and the streams of the etheric ocean – which is why I have not included Tsing's article in the discussion.

[133] I am grateful to Nadzeya Husakouskaya for the reference to *Lenin Was a Mushroom*.

[134] Kuryokhin 1991. *Lenin was a Mushroom* (part two). 1:05 - 1:16.

mushroom radio-waves. "Look at me, Agatha!" Małgosia says. "You are full of mushrooms!"[135] And it is true; in meeting Małgosia's gaze, the mushrooms respond, and we see Agatka's body filling up with them, closing the distance of the paradoxical hunt. Might the same happen for the viewers of *Mushroom Land TV*? Might the mushroom radio-waves stream out of the digital medium – like the waves of an etheric ocean - and into the body of whoever is watching, rearranging the threshold between self and other, perhaps even between the living and the dead?

"The phone rings. I answer – *nothing*," Agatka's mother says, speaking from the shadows. "It went on for days. Eventually, one day I hear a voice: 'Turn on the TV, ma'am' … Because your daughter is on the TV …"[136] There is a *nothing* flowing from the phone, as an answer to Agatka's mother's greeting. In this *nothing* she attempts to find a *something*: an answer, a terrain, a TV-show, her daughter. Eventually she gets a lead: her daughter has been spotted not just on TV, but in the city of Garwolin. Unfortunately, "[i]t turned out basically, that this city exists only on a map".[137] The *something* of the map led back to a *nothing*. The map lied.

Watching this episode made me do a Google search that led me to triumphantly declare the mother wrong, for Garwolin is indeed an actual city in Eastern Poland. Yet, after a few moments it dawned on me that I had arrived at that conclusion due to a Wikipedia entry and Google Maps. In other words, I had consulted much the same companions and *vade mecums* as Agatka's mother might have; spectral guides that, like all maps, *lie*. How do I know that Garwolin does not, in fact, only exist on a map? Indeed, the shape of Garwolin as it appears on the map is not the shape of Garwolin as it would appear outside of the map, were it to appear at all. Spectral companions, such as maps, *are not what they say they are*, that is, they are not perfect representations of the world outside, for then they would *be* that world. Instead, they thrive on distance, absence and the abyssal void

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[135] *Mushroom Land TV/Smile Guide*. Episode 1. *How effectively apple* (2013). 05:03 – 05:09.

[136] *Mushroom Land TV/Smile Guide*. Episode 2. *How to make from paper* (2014). 01:27 – 01:49. Emphasis in added to quote.

[137] *Mushroom Land TV/Smile Guide*. Episode 4. *How own hair* (2014). 02:18 – 02:20.

between the thing and its representation, word and world, making them "constitutive of a certain form of reality, not merely a representation of it" (Mittman 2006: 28). In this sense, perhaps the map was right; through trickery it led to an abyssal void, an in-between rather than a final destination, reachable through a linear trajectory. In that 'failing', the distance of the paradoxical hunt is upheld. Yet, as Derrida pointed out, the promise of teeth is inherent to this distance, as is the transgressive curse of the evil eye that may be looking back from what one thought was only *nothing*. Perhaps the failure of the map, the being led astray, was necessary in order for Agatka's mother to find Mushroom Land? Indeed, it is from within the TV that she tells us, the viewers, of her failure to reach her destination. She even claims that finding Mushroom Land is not hard. On the contrary, "it's the return that may prove a bit more difficult".[138]

In the unsteady streams of infectious mushroom waves, it is impossible to say who is on the inside, and who is on the outside; who is trying to get in, and who is trying to get out. Like Smile.dog, whose transgressive curse spills across time and space and narratives, Mushroom Land is uncannily excessive too, yet the c(o)urse it takes seems to be the one of the meal: the ingestion and expulsion of food – such as the contagious mushroom radio-wave - is something that appears again and again in Agatka's guides, making them companions in the sense of the *cum panis*, with bread. In the following, I will go into more detail with the question of ingestion as transgression, not least in connection with anxiety.

7.

Like meat from the bone. Anxiety and the *corps morcelé*.

The mushrooms of Mushroom Land are not what they seem; they are hoaxes and trickery, monstrously unruly and impossible to pin down as just one thing. As food, they can be consumed, yet they also seem to do their own consuming, as they take

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[138] *Mushroom Land TV/Smile Guide*. Episode 1. *How effectively apple* (2013): 01:51 -01:55.

over the host, as in the case of Agatka. They are the monstrous and ominous radio-waves of an etheric ocean and its cold, dark depths. As such, like an abyssal void, they may demand absolute hospitality, threatening the unitary subject with fragmentation as it faces the open, devouring mouth of its other.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the void in Lacanian anxiety is the Primordial Other, that is, the mother, with whom the child was connected before the disruption caused by the symbolic order. In *Mushroom Land TV*, this imaginary is hinted at as well. As Agatka's mother puts it, she and her daughter have been separated "like a meat from this proverbial bone",[139] as if they used to be one body, one creature. This 'oneness' seems to be looming again, and it is the streams of the mushroom radio-waves that bring with them the spectre of such overflowing. Through the editing of the film, the similarity of the mushroom's shape with that of the uterus and fallopian tubes are emphasised, and cross-cuts that lay bare female anatomy are provided interchangeably with images of the cutting and cooking of meat. At one point, Małgosia is shown with the body of a cow, uterus and vagina laid bare in a cross-cut, a bull in the background. As such, the shape of mushrooms seems to encompass both containment and the being contained as thresholds between inside and outside shift. This shifting of the threshold is connected to the body of the m/other, not least the reproductive female body that is consumed both sexually and as food. This, however, is also the body that threatens to consume in return, when the subject encounters the void in anxiety, fragmenting the imagined, ideal body.

Agatka does, indeed, appear fragmented in this encounter, a *corps morcelé* whose limbs are stretched, shortened, out of proportion, moving too slowly or too quickly. She does not appear as a gathered unity, an ideal body, and language seems to fail her: the Smile Guide episodes all have nonsensical titles, such as '*how effectively apple'* and *'how properly telephone'*. There is also an episode on *'how to make from paper'*, even though what it is one should be making

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[139] *Mushroom Land TV/Smile Guide*. Episode 2. *How to make from paper* (2014). 02:00 – 02:03.

from paper is impossible to say. The episode shifts between close ups of meat; the violent cutting of meat; cows; food appearing out of Agatka's mouth; the twitching of a cow's skin and Agatka writing very neatly - 'cow' - before scratching out the word, breaking the paper. She peels the broken paper back, revealing the word 'mama' on a different piece of paper underneath. "It is ready,"[140] she says, yet exactly what this 'it' is, is not explained. Here, 'it' seems to linger somewhere between food and writing, body and words, moving between them like it moved between Cecil and Dr. Kayali, never settling on a singular and easily defined meaning. Like the subject-less and object-less *es spukt*, this 'it' tricks, spooks and haunts, deferring an important message between people and through the void.

Agatka seems in the grips of a haunted, anxious aporia, an abyssal void, perhaps, which is cold – *take a warm sweater along* - and her seemingly only chance of escaping this coldness, is to make away with the mother-like squirrel, Małgosia. "Oh no, I've become a Snow Queen!" Agatka exclaims, while caught in a pile of snow. "What do I do?"[141] Małgosia tells her to do a spell, yet the spell Agatka casts is the one that turns the squirrel-mother-cow into a steak. Possibly devoured, Małgosia is removed from the episode and Agatka is released from FRE E ZIN G. At the end, however, Małgosia returns behind the dark silhouette of Agatka's mother, saying: "You won't catch me"[142], while reaching out to the viewer. As in the paradoxical hunt, the spell of conjuration - *bubalus-bubalis, a-choo!* - promises both distance and nearness. The spectre leaves only so that the hunter can run after it, keeping it within sight.

In Mushroom Land, the threshold between inside and outside shift and changes, maps lie, and movement becomes the non/step of the fragmented body in aporia. Words and limbs fail Agatka in this aporia, and this may well be the moment when Kevin offers the assistance of his Smiling God, who reflects back

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[140] *Mushroom Land TV/Smile Guide*. Episode 2. *How to make from paper* (2014). 03:50 – 03:53.
[141] *Mushroom Land TV/Smile Guide*. Episode 2. *How to make from paper* (2014). 04:00 – 04:03.
[142] *Mushroom Land TV/Smile Guide*. Episode 2. *How to make from paper* (2014). 05:57 – 06:10.

one's imperfect self: *and what if I told you you could kill your imperfect self?* he asks, for – according to the laws of mushrooms, as jokingly dictated by Kuryokhin – only one personality can exist at a time. The self must be unitary, self-present, either mushroom or human, perfect or imperfect, living in the symbolic order or swallowed by the void. One must also be either dead or alive, not both, not neither. Yet, in spite of having attempted to conjure away Małgosia, Agatka seems to reject these divides; after possibly having eaten the squirrel, Agatka keeps her hidden - itching and twitching - in her scalp and in her hair, re-membering. She has *eaten well*, that is, as a *cum panis*, keeping a certain distance between self and other that makes space for response as interruption and indigestion. *You won't catch me*, Małgosia says while reaching out to the viewer, simultaneously distant and near. *You won't catch me, but keep trying. Chase me so that you can keep me close*, the spectre of Derrida's spectral hunt says. The squirrel has not been domesticated or fully absorbed, but lives on as an in-between – *incorporated*.

8.

Incorporation. Failure and refusal to mourn.

Incorporation, Derrida argues, forms part of failed and/or refused mourning. To mourn 'correctly', at least according to Freud, involves the slow withdrawal from a dead loved one through an "interiorizing idealization … ideally *and* quasi-literally devouring them" (Derrida quoted in Castricano 2001: 37. Emphasis in original). This 'proper' way of mourning, called 'introjection', is based on an idealizing absorption of the other. Jodey Castricano explains the difference between incorporation and introjection, saying:

> [I]ncorporation is distinct from introjection … in that it signals the "failure" or the "refusal" to digest or assimilate the other. If the dead other is not to be interiorized, it is, nonetheless, taken inside the subject and lodged within the ego, but as a secret, sealing the loss of the object and marking the refusal to mourn, incorporation marks

the limits of introjection since it consists of the desire (whose?) to keep the dead *alive*, safe, inside me. (Castricano 2001: 36. Emphasis in original)

In incorporation, the dead is kept inside the subject, within a crypt, as a secret. Something, I argue, to carry with her as a *vade mecum*, a companion that moves according to the wandering of failing and that has been ingested *cum panis*, yet not assimilated. A ghost and a secret that is not to be revealed, as Torok and Abraham might have wanted. Whereas Freud understood this lack of assimilation as a problem, Derrida argues that incorporation - the opening up of a space for the other within – as well as living *with* spectres, in their company, is what makes the subject possible at all. It is through finite as well as the infinite spectral systems that the subject takes shape, both as something specific and something spectral, connected to past, future and present in a companionship with ghosts. In the dance of relating, nothing and no one is made from scratch, but need their others. This moves one's others to the inside: into the stomach, the void, the crypt. Yet, since Derrida argues that failed mourning is intrinsic to the subject, *mourning must have taken place before the subject can even mourn*, making it part of the paradoxical, spectral hunt. As such, mourning work is an impossibility: one has to mourn before the death of the other, that is, remember and anticipate the death of a companion *in order to make space for that companion within*: "[I]t is mourning which established the enclosure where the other is held in the work of mourning. Since mourning builds up the self where mourning unfolds, it has to occur in advance of itself if it is to happen at all. But that is impossible," literary scholar Christopher Bracken writes (quoted in Castricano 2001: 35). Castricano explains:

It is only by grieving for another who has yet to die – the anticipation of mourning – that, says Derrida, 'all "being-in-us," "in me," "between us", or between ourselves' is constituted in advance … It is the *possibility* of death, therefore, that determines the 'within-me' and the 'within-us' … [P]rofound mourning is the reaction to the [anticipated] loss of someone who is loved." (Castricano 2001: 35)

Whereas the traditional *memento mori* is an object that reminds the self that it will die at some point and that it therefore needs to live virtuously – taking us back to the virtue ethics of Charles Ess – the *memento mori/vade mecum* that I suggest here is one that points to the yet to come. It is the *memento mori* as anticipation, the effect of something deeply remembered that has not yet taken place, but which is arriving nonetheless. Something for which one must create a space within, a crypt – or a void, perhaps - in which the other may take space. As such, it is a relational *memento mori*, the dance of relating as a *danse macabre*, and it is in this *danse* that I can best imagine what it might mean to learn to live (finally), while giving-the-other-to-eat: it is the experience of proximity and distance, the spectral circle, where the effect of anticipated loss carves out space for the other's distance *within*, *close by*. It is a learning to live (finally), a becoming-subject in a relation with the other that is both external and internal to the subject herself. And it is the remembrance of your own finitude, your own death that has already taken place for those who love you, as they make space for you within, in a crypt where you will not be allowed to disappear. It is remembering the mourning of the other as you yourself take the space of the other of the other, giving the other yourself to eat.

The smile, a mute trace of kindness and hospitality and a showing forth of the inside that will at some point become outside, yet which would already be visible from the point of view of the spectres within, may be understood as a gesture of hospitality as well as a gesture reminding the other that the one who smiles is already an uninvited guest within. This is companionship as a *memento mori* that moves the self and the other in a *danse* as well as an at times anxious awaiting in aporia for that which has already – impossibly – taken place. In this sense, following ghosts may be a question of what Castricano calls ventri*locating* (2001: 130), as the subject is spoken and moved by the ghosts of the crypt within.

In ventri*location*, the subject's sense of self-presence is deferred and delayed as it speaks with – and is being spoken by - another's voice. This is the voice from the crypt of ghosts within; those that have gone before, those that are, and those that are yet to come. Room has been made for them through incorporation

– the giving-the-other-to-eat that is giving the other a space to live. This returns us to the guts and the transgression of the c(o)urse, since ventriloquy means "'speaking in the belly,' which was not originally an entertainer's trick but rather a rumbling sort of internal speech, regarded as a sign of spiritual inspiration or (more usually) demonic possession" (Online Etymology Dictionary: ventriloquy [n.]).[143] Purring or growling or rumbling – call it what you like.

The 'authenticity' of the speech, this ventri*location*, is confirmed by the ear of the other who countersigns, as Derrida calls it,[144] the voice of ghosts by recognizing them, understanding them, agreeing to their being. "You monster!" Cecil declares, countersigning an otherwise invisible signature, which is then countersigned by the listeners, yet again countersigned visually through the reading of these lines. Kevin, the smiling monster, takes form in these countersignatures – he is given a face and a smile - yet remains unseen. *"*[W]e all get frightened and freeze in the face of unbearable terror," the Night Vale inhabitant called The Faceless Old Woman Who Secretly Lives in Your Home explains. "I mean, only if we can see that face. Some faces are apparently there but unseeable."*[145]* While frozen in front of the faceless *nothing* – the abyssal void – that threatens contamination and overflowing, one may encounter something where one expected to find nothing. A tense awaiting for the (death of) the other, perhaps, that opens up to the 'evil eye' of the something that stares back from behind a visor. It is this staring back – *respecere* – that gives the subject a face with which to smile and open up and thereby making room for the other within. The smile splits the human face, turning it inside out in a gesture of both hospitality and violence (or the violence of hospitality) as it signals towards the crypt within the self and the crypt within the one receiving the smile. Room is being made, at that very moment, for the receiver of the smile within the smiling subject, and it is this space that allows the smiling subject to speak and signify – to engage in a dance of

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[143] Link: http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=ventriloquy&allowed_in_frame=0 Last accessed: April 2016.
[144] For more on the countersignature, see Castricano 2001.
[145] *Welcome to Night Vale*. *The Debate* (2014). 47:25 – 47:35.

relating where no face preexists its encounter, and learning to live is a learning to live (finally), showing forth the *memento mori* of the skull in the mouth. Weird, how it's so visible in the mouth.

Here, at the end of the chapter, I will return to Kevin and Agatka and the smiles they promise us if we follow them.

9.

The skull in our mouths.

In Kevin's worship of the Smiling God, the smile becomes a destroyer of the imperfect self, the *corps morcelé*. The self promised by the Smiling God is a contained self that does not leak and bleed, as well as a self that is not 'defective' in any sense, as becomes clear when Kevin promises that Cecil's niece will be able to live a happy life, if only she has the paralysis in her legs 'fixed'. In the encounter with the Smiling God the full and immediate image is promised: complete introjection into the guts of the Smiling God itself, the annihilation of deferral, of doubles, of delays, anticipation and arrival. Here is only completion, absolute self-presence and knowledge. Everything is transparent and there are no secrets – no internal crypts, no lying maps - left. Says Kevin:

> So many secrets and conspiracies and darkness in our days. It all felt so important, so permanent!
> But then we met the Smiling God! Oh, it was so wonderful! The sun stopped setting! Or– maybe there wasn't a sun anymore. Maybe there was just that other…*brighter* light. Who knows? I do know that I couldn't stop smiling. None of us could! And our smiles seemed better, fuller, wider.
> Soon we had no need for government cover-ups, or secrets. Everything was transparent. Literally. You could see through everything and everyone. The bones, the blood, the scurrying insects inside every human body!

There was so much work to be done. And such a wonderful company to do it for! Even the ones that resisted the most at first soon found that they loved the Smiling God more than anyone. Even the most resistant of radio hosts soon found his way to productive work, happy songs, and a wide, gaping smile.

(*Welcome to Night Vale*. Episode 49. *Old Oak Doors Part B* [2014]: 08:46 – 10:20)

The introjection has been absolute: the companionship of the Smiling God is one of complete presence, transparency and no secret crypts within from whence the subject is ventri*located*. As a contrast to Carlos' smile, Kevin's is even likened to an 'abandoned cemetery',[146] pointing yet again towards the emptiness of the crypt within. Here there are no secrets, the ghosts have gone, leaving room for a morality based on easily decidable values of growth and productivity: *it's hard to smile when there's no working!* Kevin declared earlier in this chapter. *And if we aren't smiling, then what value do we have? Watch me smile!*

This does not, however, mean that Kevin is necessarily mourning perfectly himself, as the case of Vanessa seems to indicate. She is still very much alive to him, though her voice is not a strong one, and he can hardly remember what conversations they had that very morning. But she is there, present and dead, her skull sparking thoughts that are weird, the remembrance of a death that has both happened and is still to come since she is kept alive in a crypt that, fittingly, is a radio studio - a place that spectralizes. Her voice may be subtle at the moment, but it is there nonetheless, haunting Kevin's memory, her smile a spectral one that evokes both life and death as well as the 'undead' of tele-technology. There is a small resistance to the transparency of the Smiling God here, as well as a hint at another personality: *the most resistant of radio hosts soon found his way to productive work, happy songs, and a wide, gaping smile*, Kevin said. This is the paradox of the spectral hunt as conjuration; as Kevin claims that this im/possible other Kevin no longer exists, he calls upon him, drawing him closer in order to chase him away, making him an absent presence. This ghostly Kevin from another now is

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[146] *Welcome to Night Vale*. The Debate (2014). 47:17 – 47:19.

given a face in this encounter as well as a wide, gaping smile; a possible haunted crypt, a space to house the many im/possible Kevins that haunt and speak through the present one. Several spectres live within this smiling monster, proving Kuryokhin's mushroom theory regarding singular personalities wrong.

In Mushroom Land, the smile lingers as a spectral promise of happiness and success as well, yet is constantly deferred. In episode four, however, it seems to arrive as enlightenment, not unlike the case of Kevin's Smiling God. "Forget the hair",[147] a text reads, and Agatka goes bald, her eyes no longer images of eyes, but glowing lights. *there was just that other…brighter light.* The hair, the very space where she kept the ghost of Małgosia, has been stripped from her, and as a reward, she seems to receive some kind of divine translucence. *And our smiles seemed better, fuller, wider. Soon we had no need for government cover-ups, or secrets. Everything was transparent*, Kevin said. "NEW AWAKENING", the texts in Mushroom Land read, and: "YEAR 2001", seemingly promising some kind of new beginning as well. One without the ghosts of Małgosia and Agatka's mother – one without anxiety and aporia. Instead, Agatka is presented with a Małgosia-shaped void and a man dressed as her mother. After this encounter, she appears after the closing credits – this time as a puppet of papier-mâché, lunging out of nothingness to soundlessly scream and wave at the viewers, her mouth a silent O. It is as if she has been asked to materialise, to take form. Either that, or disperse.

In the following episode, Agatka is no longer made from papier-mâché, but she is haunted by her bald other, who steps in to welcome the viewer while Agatka sleeps. Now, however, Małgosia has found a way to return. As she and other ghosts have said before: *you cannot catch me*, and ghosts do not fear the void. On the contrary, it is through *nothing* that *something* may arrive, and the void-like silhouette of Małgosia merely turned her into yet another absent presence. Peeping out of Agatka's nostril, she claims: "I'm everywhere".[148] She then proceeds to ask Agatka to join her on a field-trip, ventri*locating* her elsewhere and making

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[147] *Mushroom Land TV/Smile Guide*. Episode 4. *How own hair* (2014). 06:55 – 06:57.
[148] *Mushroom Land TV/Smile Guide*. Episode 5. *How properly telephone* (2015). 02:15 – 02:18.

her rumble; aggressively, Agatka shows her teeth and begins to bark and growl, lunging at the TV-screen, no longer the calm and collected host, but something *different*. As a papier-mâché puppet she had had no voice, but now spectres rumble through her. "Agatha and Maggie the squirrel will take you to the world of wonderful journeys and worries,"[149] the You Tube channel promises, and in this worried journeying, Agatka stays *with* the spectres, moves *with* them as she ventri*locates*, rumbling. The smile becomes the growl, conjuring forth the spectre of a demon dog; someone capable of the c(o)urse of the 'evil eye' and the contaminating and possessive flows of the etheric ocean.

In both *Welcome to Night Vale* and *Mushroom Land TV*, the smile is a hoax, the parlour trick of the ventriloquist who speaks from an absent present mouth. It is the rumble of the possessed, those with crypts inside. In its excessiveness, it promises the destruction of all things imperfect and negative through introjection, the becoming-selfsame of the stranger as it is crushed by teeth and digested, closing the void between self and other. At the same time, however, the opening of the mouth also offers hospitality as companionship, the *cum panis* of incorporation. This is a companionship of learning to live (finally) *with* ghosts, *following* them according to a non-linear trajectory. This following is not about the destination; it is about making room for the one who is always arriving, yet to come, for it is not yet dead and in need of a crypt. As such, it moves in and out at will, neither fully inside, nor fully outside – not unlike the smile itself.

Learning to live (finally) is, I argue, a following of ghosts into a spectral hunt where eyes promise distance and teeth promise proximity. It is an ethics of nearness and distance that does not end in introjection, but incorporation, as well as an acknowledgement of the dance of relating as a *danse macabre*: a becoming-dead of self and other, and a rejection and failure to let this mean forgetfulness and full, transparent immediacy. Instead, one owes a debt to the dead as well as the yet-to-die. In the smile, hospitality and violence comes together, pointing towards

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[149] *KrainaGrzybowTV*, YouTube channel ('about'). Link: https://www.youtube.com/user/krainagrzybowtv/about Last accessed: April 2016.

the *memento mori* of mirrored and doubled skulls, so visible in the mouth that it is *weird*, yet to come. Who thinks of these things? Kevin asked. When grinning at us, the monster may simply reflect what we cannot see at that moment, seemingly so distant, but already so near: the skull in our mouths.

onwards

The following – and last – chapter will be an open conclusion that engages more with the question of conjuration as a hoax, a trick and a non-ending.

CHAPTER FIVE
A Trick

1.

Not a happy ending.

"I'd like to ask you something. Do you believe in ghosts?" Pascale says to Derrida, and he responds with a discussion on tele-technology and spectres before finally asking her back: "And you, do you believe in ghosts?"[150]

In this text, not only Pascale – who later returns via the spectralizing medium through which she was first asked the question to answer *yes* and *here* and *now* – but several others have offered their responses: Kevin, the eyeless monster, who answered *yes! We must!* but whose transparent ghost was a Smiling God, intent on crushing imperfection and uncertainty; Mr. L., who responded first through questions, then by passing on a curse; Nathan's copied and pasted text, saying *she's more real to me in that state*; Emily, who forgot her jumper, and Agatka, who remembered hers; Mary E. who wonders: *and who was to say something worse would not come for me, if I did as the creature asked?* and Cecil, who agrees: *what good could come of this, children? What good could come of any of this*? All engage, in each their own way, with the question of: *and you, do you believe in ghosts?* Yet, as was also the case with Pascale, their responses merely serve to interrupt any certainties their answers might have promised.

In this text, I have explored the uncertainties offered by these digital monsters by following in the invisible, silent paw-steps of Smile.dog. As such, I have navigated according to three primary coordinates: *the curse*, *the void* and *the smile*. Beginning with hauntology as a possible improper ontology of the virtual, I have explored the open system of deconstruction, which may be understood as the curse

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[150] *Ghost Dance* 1983. 15:55 – 21:07

of a creature such as Smile.dog. Smile.dog's curse cannot be contained, nor done away with; it can only be endlessly deferred through copying and pasting, creating an open system that can never be exited. One will always be somehow connected to the curse, even if one has passed it on. *And who was to say something worse would not come for me, if I did as the creature asked?* Mary E. says, and she is right; one cannot know in advance where and when the monster may return, or even if it will return at all. This opens a space of not-knowingness between self and other; a space of yearning, anticipation and anxiety as one awaits the arrival of the monster. Will it arrive now? How about *now*? Maybe … NOW? In the waiting and the yearning, the effect of the monster still to arrive/return is felt as space is made for it, in advance of its arrival. This spectral space disrupts any simple distinction between inside and outside, self and other, presence and absence, past and future. While staying in the company of the monster that is still to return, I argue, glimpses of im/possible elsewheres may be found.

Moving on to the void – the dark space behind the demon dog, from whence a hand reaches out as if to grab the viewer – I have mapped out aporia as a question of anxious awaiting in the abyss. My argument is that the void is not an 'ethically bankrupt character', but a way to imagine a non-linear relationality with that which haunts the depths of, for example, digital technology. An ethics of responsibility needs to stay open to these depths, in order to listen to the other as *something* arrives from what one thought was merely silent *nothing*. *What good could come of this?* Cecil asks, and as in the case of Smile.jpg, one cannot know. This is what the void reminds us – *that we don't understand even more*, as Cecil says – and thereby it makes possible that which one could not possibly imagine.

Finally, there is the smile of the grinning dog, splitting its face from ear to ear. Why do monsters smile? In Chapter Four, I have discussed the smile as a figure of relationality, this time not so much exploring external voids, as the internal ones, that is, the crypt inside in which we house our ghosts. This crypt is carved out by the anticipation of death, not least the death of the loved other. The crypt makes space for that other, the loved one yet to die, promising to house her, to keep her

safe, undigested and unassimilated. This is failed mourning as incorporation: the refusal to absorb the loved other and thereby creating discomfort, like the scratching scalp that houses the ghost of a squirrel. The smile opens up the subject and invites the other inside, promising both transgression and distance. It is this internal crypt that allows the subject to speak, as the ghosts ventriloquize her, rumbling from the stomach; purring and growling, call it what you like.

It is "not a 'happy ending' we need, but a non-ending" (1992: 327) Haraway says. In this final chapter, my aim is therefore not to conclude in the sense of providing the 'correct' answer to the question "and you, do you believe in ghosts?", nor to "make the stor[ies] come out 'right'" (1992: 327), as Haraway puts it. 'Righting' the stories and their monsters would bring them back into a morality of easily containable values such as 'good' and 'bad', and I do not wish to do that. Instead, I want to stay with the uncertainty, in its company, keeping the stories as open as possible in order not to explain the ghosts by finally exposing their lies, nor the monsters, by pointing out their failings. Instead, I would like to tempt the spectres out by offering this book not as a map of readily existing worlds, but as a *conjuration*: the summoning that is also an exorcism. This paradoxical hunt may, I argue, be a way to imagine a sustainable way of moving *through* rather than *across* aporia, since the conjurer's trick – as Kevin has already demonstrated in Chapter Four – allows one to stay in the company of ghosts, while asking them to leave. As such, the conjuration may offer a break as well as a summoning, that is, a transgressive but sustainable companionship.[151] I offer this trick in the form of *corrections*.

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[151] I am grateful to Edyta Just for raising the question of sustainability in the context of trembling and aporia at my 90% seminar.

2.

"We affirm once again that *nothing* is real ..." The paradox of conjuration.

 "Listeners, we here at Night Vale Community Radio need to offer the following correction," Cecil announces, continuing:

> In a previous broadcast, we described the world as "real."
>
> We indicated, *using our voice*, that it was made up of many real objects and entities, and we gave descriptions of these disparate parts. We even went so far as to ascribe action and agency to some of these entities.
>
> But, as we all know, nothing can be fully understood to be "real." Any description of the world we give is simply the world we *experience* – which is to say, a narrative we force onto whatever horror or void lies behind the scrim of our perception.
>
> We at the station offer our deepest, most humble apologies for the previous, erroneous, report. We affirm once again that *nothing* is real – including this correction, and least of all, your experience of hearing it.
>
> This has been Corrections.
>
> (*Welcome to Night Vale*. Episode 38: *Orange Grove* [2014]. 11:31 – 12:50. Emphasis added)

Cecil and the Night Vale Community Radio have made a mistake, an 'erroneous report', he says. They have failed at their mission to map out and make clear what goes on, and what *is* in the small town of Night Vale. For this they apologise and offer a correction. Yet, Cecil's correction, like Derrida's concept of conjuration, briefly discussed in Chapter Four, is a paradox; rather than undo the damage that has been done – the error, the failure, the mistake, the inadvertent lie - it allows it to stay *with* the supposed 'truth'. In the correction, two seemingly opposite realities co-exist, while simultaneously cancelling each other out. *Nothing is real including this correction*, he says. Or to be exact: *they* say, for Cecil speaks as a 'we', as the multiplicity of the radio station. Yet, the voice he uses is in singular form: *We indicated, using our voice*, he says.

In *Spectres of Marx*, Derrida also 'corrects', such as when he discusses a better world: "To live otherwise, and better. No, not better, but more justly. But *with* them" (2011: xviii. Emphasis in original). It is also in *Spectres of Marx* that Derrida wonders about the voice and its abilities to perform such correcting, that is, to make *nothing* (*nothing* is real, Cecil says) appear where before there was (a wrong) *something*. He does so through the concept of 'conjuration', which means "to exorcise: to attempt both to destroy and to disavow … a kind of ghost who comes back" (Derrida 2011: 59). There is, however, a paradox to this exorcism; in order to ask a ghost to leave, one must first acknowledge it, call upon it, summon it. The word 'conjuration' even refers to such a summoning, as Derrida makes clear, saying that a conjuration is also "the magical incantation destined to evoke, to bring forth *with the voice*, to convoke a charm or a spirit" (2011: 50. Emphasis added). The performativity of the voice in conjuration thus becomes difficult to control; whereas it may exorcise a spirit, it may also call upon it. It may even call upon that which was not *there* before the incantation: "Conjuration says in sum the appeal that causes to come forth *with the voice* and thus it makes come, by definition, what is *not there* at the present moment of the appeal. This voice does not describe, what it says certifies nothing; its words cause something to happen" (Derrida 2011: 50. Emphasis in original).

The voice of the conjurer is performative; it calls *something* out of *nothing*, or, quoting Cecil and Derrida through one another: it *certifies that nothing is real*, lending a spectral existence to this *nothing*, making it an absent presence. In this sense, conjuration is a paradoxical hunt, as discussed in Chapter Four; a magic incantation that both calls forth and exorcises, the hunter calling out to the prey: "Come so that I may chase you! You hear! I chase you. I pursue you. I run after you to chase you away from here. I will not leave you alone" (Derrida 2011: 175). This is Kevin conjuring away his former self by saying: "Even the most resistant of radio hosts soon found his way to productive work, happy songs, and a wide, gaping smile".[152] The spectre of the resistant radio host is here exorcised, but in order to

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[152] *Welcome to Night Vale*. Episode 49. *Old Oak Doors Part B* (2014): 10:00 – 10:20.

be done away with, he must first be called upon. The correction corrects and in this correction, it both calls itself forth and conjures itself away, meaning that what was corrected is left to exist simultaneously with its own exorcism, making it difficult to decide, which came first, and which came last for they are both *there*. This, I argue, is the movement of the *revenant*; it begins by returning. Correction and corrected exist only in their mutual dance of relating, in 'erroneous report', as Cecil called it, and in this error, in this failing, there is a going astray, a wandering that does not lead to a pre-given destination, but a ventri*location*.

3.

Bubalus-bubalis, a-choo! The hoax as a conjuration.

As discussed in Chapter Four, ventri*location* points to how ghosts speak through the subject, rumbling from the crypt within. In this sense, it is perhaps not strange that Cecil refers to his correction as a question of a 'we', 'using *our* voice' to conjure (away), nor that Derrida speaks of conjuration as something concerning companionship, a *with* the voice. It is this ghost-filled companionship – '*go with us'* - that makes conjuration possible, since it gives the subject a voice with which to speak the magic incantation. This points to another meaning of conjuration: 'to swear', in the sense of entering an alliance and a conspiracy with someone, here the ghost itself. Discussing the scene in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, where Hamlet meets the ghost of his father, Derrida explains the idea of conjuration as such swearing: "It is the apparition that enjoins them to conspire to *silence the apparition*, and to promise secrecy on the subject of the one who demands such an oath from them: one must not know whence comes the injunction, the conspiracy, the promised secret" (Derrida 2011: 50. Emphasis in original). In other words, the conjuration that is being spoken – *with our voice* – in order to ask a ghost to leave or to come forth, is given in the first place by the return of a ghost, speaking from an internal crypt that it has asked be kept a secret. "Can one, in order to question it, address

oneself to a ghost?" Derrida asks, but then corrects himself: "The question deserves perhaps to be put the other way: Could one *address oneself in general* if already some ghost did not come back?" (2011: 221. Emphasis in original). It is the secret of the ghosts within, that is, conjuration as alliance and conspiracy that makes conjuration as summoning and exorcism possible. Dwelling inside, in the crypt, making the subject rumble like someone possessed – for that is what she is – the ghost speaks the magic words of the conjurer: *hocus-pocus*, or *hoax*.[153] These words – the words of trickery - are performative; they make *something* happen, and this *something* is never exactly what was promised. Smile.dog's curse is an example of this; the 'real' curse is constantly deferred, since the reader is unlikely to experience the promised 'temporal lobe epilepsy' in the encounter with the JPEG. In that case, the story goes, you have merely encountered a trick or a hoax, which means that the 'real' thing is still out there, somewhere, merely delayed and deferred. That is a promise.

A somewhat similar relation between hoax and deferred truth can be found in the stories surrounding the supposedly cursed image *Smile* (2007). *Smile* does, however, differ slightly from the story of Smile.dog, since the girl in the picture hides her face and therefore the smile that is otherwise evoked by the title. Standing with her back to the viewer, staring into the woods, she seems to be watching something hidden from view, or listening intensely – perhaps for you, her *arrivant*. If she hears you, she will turn around, and she will smile, her face split by a void-like gap full of teeth. From that moment on, you will have nightmares of the darkness between those trees and the darkness between those teeth, finally knowing what she was looking at and what she was listening for –

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[153] 'Hoax' may derive directly from 'hocus', that is, a 'conjurer', as well as the magic words of 'hocus-pocus'. See: Online Etymology Dictionary: 'hocus-pocus' (interj.) and 'hoax'. Links: http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=hocus-pocus&allowed_in_frame=0 and http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=hoax&allowed_in_frame=0 Last accessed: April 2016. For more on the interconnections between hoaxes, hocus-pocus and conjuration, see Henriksen 2014 [A].

- or so the internet legend goes.[154] Yet, even as all one sees is the girl's back and the *nothing* of the absent smile, the possibility of it haunts the image and for the briefest of *nows* the viewer is asked to carve out a space for the impossible arrival of the monstrous *arrivant*. In the *nothingness* and silence summoned by the hoax and the trick, *something* promises to take place in the place made for the other.

It is not only smiling monsters that hoaxes. Turning to the tale of Emily and Nathan, journalist Mark Shrayber writes that the story "has been catching the attention of thousands of people, and even if it's a hoax (saying it right now) it's a very *engaging* albeit creepy read" (2014. Emphasis added). When the hoax *engages*, it performs a pledge, that is, it promises an allegiance,[155] returning us to conjuration as a conspiracy *against* the ghost, *with* the ghost. In other words, one swears to keep secret the crypt from whence the ghost makes it possible to swear that one will keep secret the crypt from whence the ghost makes it possible to swear, thus creating the specular circle of the paradoxical hunt, where first time is always a return. In the hoax as a conjuration – *hocus-pocus*, or: *bubalus-bubalis, a-choo!* – there is no linear movement between cause and effect, only this paradoxical circle and the company of ghosts whose effects are felt, not least when they lie, and not least when they go beyond the intent of the one performing the trick. As Applebaum puts it: "Conjuration must end in perjury" (2009: 93). Through the lies, the failing, the hoaxing, the secret of the ghost is preserved and the alliance one once made with it forgotten, because the ghost demands that it be so: *one must not know whence comes the injunction, the conspiracy, the promised secret*, Derrida writes. It is this secret that makes it possible for the ghost to speak through the subject, uttering the words of the conjuration, which promised to keep the ghost a secret in the first place. Paradoxical, speculative circle; the ghost begins by

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[154] See picture at page: 181.
[155] Etymologically, 'engage' means 'to pledge', and a pledge is 'to promise' and to 'be responsible for'. A pledge is also an 'allegiance vow'. See Online Etymology Dictionary: engage (v), pledge (n) and pledge (v.). Links:
http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=engage and
http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=pledge Last accessed: April 2016.

returning – and *correcting*. The ethical task is to not demand of the ghost that it tells its secret or of the monster that it does not wander, meaning that what is important here is not what the 'truth' of the hoax is or whether the corrections is really 'correct'. The important part is what the conjurer's cry of 'hocus-pocus' *does*, that is, its *virtue* in the sense of its ability to create effects through *seeming*. This is not virtue ethics, but an ethics of trickery and failure, for what responds to the conjurer's cry will never be what she intended it to be. Instead, it will respond to her through wandering and a going astray that means that all she can do is listen for its silent footsteps and wait, knowing that she *does not understand even more* and that she will be surprised.

4.

"It's the ghosts, who will answer you."

"And you, do you believe in ghosts?" Derrida asks. It is not a solitary question, but one asked *with* the ghosts, one of them being the director of the film *Ghost Dance*, Ken McMullen: "This is the only thing the filmmaker dictated to me", Derrida says. "At the end of my improvisation, I was to say to her: 'And what about you, do you believe in ghosts?'" (2013: 40). In other words, Derrida was ventriloquized and not just by the director:

> you're asking a ghost whether he believes in ghosts. Here, the ghost is me. Since I've been asked to play myself in a film which is more or less improvised I feel as if I'm letting a ghost speak for me. Curiously, instead of playing myself without knowing it, I let a ghost ventriloquize my words, or play my role, which is even more amusing. The cinema is the art of ghosts, a battle of phantoms. That's what I think the cinema's about when it's not boring. It's the art of allowing ghosts to come back. That's what we're doing now. Therefore, if I'm a ghost, but believe I'm speaking with my own voice, it's precisely because I believe it's my own voice that I allow it to be taken over by another's voice. Not just any other voice, but

that of my own ghosts. So ghosts do exist. *And it's the ghosts who will answer
you.* Perhaps they already have.

(*Ghost Dance* 1983. 16:00 – 17:33. Emphasis added)

It is the ghosts, who will answer you, speaking from the secret crypt within. Through conjuration, the ghost questions its own existence; it both summons and exorcises itself in a spectral circle. In this non/step of the paradox, the ghost makes the speaking self tremble in aporia, neither completely singular nor merely a product of general, ghostly structures. She is multiple and singular in the trembling, that is, in the mute dance of relating *with* the spectral monster in writing: the Daleks, Smile.dog herself, Emily, Agatka, Cecil, Haraway. These spectres move silently, glidingly - *creepily*, as Shrayber might have said - without the beating of two feet to warn about their arrival, nor from when or where they come or where they will go. Here, the rumbles of ventri*location* are silent, the purr and the growl *felt* rather than *heard*. The origin of the spectres is a secret, a hidden crypt within from which ghosts may speak – not least to conjure themselves away, leaving the self alone for a while. In other words, I argue that conjuration makes it possible to do the impossible, that is, to stay *with* ghosts, in their company, without being consumed. The paradoxical hunt for and with distance, as Derrida calls it, makes it possible for the subject to ask the ghost to leave while still staying in its company, which promises a respite from the tense awaiting for its arrival. It has already arrived – so silently that it was never even noticed - and it is yet to come.

In this text, I have stitched together a narrative that is full of gaps and abysses, lies and wandering. I have, at times, spoken through Derrida, but mostly he and the other ghosts speak through me, ventriloquizing me. But differently. Ventrilocation, I argue, forms part of a conjuration, a tempting the ghosts out, *allowing them to come back*, as Derrida puts it. One of the ghosts who came back was Derrida himself, as I have sought – paradoxically - to follow him through digital terrains that he did not have the opportunity to explore in detail before his death. Yet, most of the ghosts remain nameless, invisible, secret. All of them, however, point toward a *beyond* the author's intent, a *beyond* the text, a *beyond* the instant

that is so crucial for the possibility of an impossible justice. This is hauntological ethics as a map of the yet-to-come that follows the ghosts through aporia, remaining open to the monstrous *arrivant* that is always a *revenant*, something that returns for the first time: a paradox. No, a correction.

        What good can come of it*?* I ask, paraphrasing Cecil. *What good can come of any of* it*?* and it may well be that nothing good comes from the tricks and hoaxes of a haunting '*it*'. But maybe something better will? No, not better, more *just*. But *with* them. *With* Cecil and Agatka, Kevin and Mary E., Smile.dog, Derrida, Emily and Haraway, Nathan and the nameless, who are yet to come, have already been, will never be. *With* them. In their company.

onwards

Stay tuned next for an exact word-for-word repeat of this broadcast that will seem to you imperceptibly but unshakably different, although you will never be able to explain why*.*

Smile (2007)

HERE BE MONSTERS

About the Stories

***Mushroom Land TV/Smile Guide* (2013 – present. Original Polish title: *KrainaGrzybowTV*)**

Mushroom Land TV is a Polish YouTube web-series. Its director/s and creator/s are unknown, as are the actors. The description of the YouTube channel reads: "Agatha and Maggie the squirrel will take you to the world of wonderful journeys and worries".[156]

At this point in time (March 2016), four episodes – one, two, four and five - have been released:

Smile Guide one – How effectively apple (December 23, 2013)

Smile Guide two - How to make from paper (February 23, 2014)

Smile Guide four - How own your hair (September 18, 2014)

Smile Guide five - How properly telephone (August 10, 2015)[157]

The channel has also released various music-videos related to the series, and a connected Facebook site posts images and teasers.

Seemingly a late 80s/early 90s children's TV-show, *Smile Guide* is hosted by the young girl Agatka – whose eyes are covered by paper eyes - and her friend, Małgosia the squirrel. In each episode, Agatka and Małgosia attempt to teach the viewers a new, nonsensical skill, such as 'how to effectively apple', yet something always gets in the way. This 'something' is usually Agatka's mother, who claims to be looking for her daughter, who was kidnapped and taken to Mushroom Land.

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[156] YouTube channel: *KrainaGrzybowTV*. Link: https://www.youtube.com/user/krainagrzybowtv/about Last accessed: April 2016.

[157] Original titles: *Poradnik Uśmiechu 1 - Jak skutecznie jabłko; Poradnik Uśmiechu 2 - Jak zrobić z papieru; Poradnik Uśmiechu 4 - Jak swoje włosy; Poradnik Uśmiechu 5 - Jak poprawnie telefon.* I am grateful to Edyta Just for double-checking and correcting the translations that are available online.

Smile Guide appears as badly produced; the colours are off, the sound is strange, the effects are cheap. In all these failures, glimpses of something not quite right are offered. These glimpses become more and more pronounced as the show progresses, and the quality of the film becomes increasingly worse.

Though not a mainstream phenomenon, *Mushroom Land TV* is fairly well-known in creepypasta circles and even has a long entry on the website *Know Your Meme* (Miluk and Pflytrap 2015). At this point in time, the series' YouTube channel has 43,666 subscribers and more than 4,000,000 views (March 2016).

In my engagement with *Mushroom Land TV*, I will be referring to the host as Agatka and the squirrel as Małgosia, which are the original, Polish names. For link to the *Mushroom Land TV* YouTube channel, individual episodes and Facebook page, see the bibliography.

My dead girlfriend keeps messaging me on Facebook. I've got the screenshots. I don't know what to do (unknown: 2014)

In July 2014, someone calling himself Nathan uploaded a series of screenshots to the Reddit community Nosleep, known as r/nosleep. r/nosleep is a forum for horror-stories told as authentic, interactive tales. As the guidelines in the side-bar states: "Everything is true *here*, even if it's not" (emphasis in original. Link in bibliography).

The screenshots show Nathan's Facebook communication with someone claiming to be his dead girlfriend, Emily. Emily communicates by copying and pasting sentences from previous messages, both her own and Nathan's, piecing together a creepypasta. She speaks of her inability to pass (*no chance of passing*) as well as the coldness she feels (FRE EZIN G). Together with the r/nosleep community, Nathan tries to find out what is going on. Eventually, however, he stops posting to the message-board. His last post is a rambling message, a piece of

creepypasta, stitched together by previous posts, eerily reminding of Emily's way of writing.

The story of Nathan and Emily went viral during the summer of 2014, seemingly resonating with the experiences of users of social media. As Mark Shrayber, a writer at the online magazine *Jezebel*, wrote: "the following story has been catching the attention of thousands of people, and even if it's a hoax (saying it right now) it's a very engaging albeit creepy read" (Shrayber 2014).

I have attempted to contact the writer of the story – whose username at r/nosleep is natesw – but without any luck. I therefore do not know his or her name, and I have also chosen not to bring any of the images that she or he uploaded. When referencing the story, I am referring to the archived version (link in bibliography). It is worth noting that the archived version is slightly different from the early version, which featured an image of Nathan at the end, seemingly taken by Emily as she is staring at him through the window. This picture features in the Jezebel article, but not in the archive, exemplifying how online stories are in constant flux. Inevitably, much may already have changed by the time this text is published.

Smile (artist unknown: 2007)

Smile is a JPEG-image that circulates online, sometimes accompanied by text. The image shows a young girl standing with her back to the viewer, staring into the woods in front of her. According to creepypasta-legend, the girl sometimes responds to the viewer's presence by turning around and smiling at her, showing rows of sharp teeth. If that happens, the viewer will begin to have nightmares about what lives in the darkness of the woods behind the girl.

See also 'Corrections'.

The Curious Case of Smile.jpg (author unknown: ca. 2008)

The Curious Case of Smile.jpg is a short text, seemingly written by an anonymous Mr. L. Mr. L. is a college-student and aspiring writer, who has given himself the task of solving the mystery of Smile.jpg, a cursed image-file that is rumoured to have been circulating online since the 1990s. According to legend, anyone who sees the image will be struck by anxiety and later have their dreams haunted by the smiling demon-dog, Smile.dog, that inhabits the image. "Spread the word," it tells its victims, willing them to show its picture to someone else. Then it will leave them alone. So it promises. Eventually Mr. L. finds Smile.jpg and adds it to the end of his text, cursing his readers.

  The Curious Case of Smile.jpg is a so-called creepypasta. 'Creepypasta' derives from 'copy' and 'paste' and is the younger sibling of copypasta, which is short pieces of text that are intended to be copied, pasted and circulated online. Whereas copypasta can cover any subject, creepypasta is more specific and aims to scare and unnerve the reader, often engaging more or less directly with themes of the paranormal. Creepypasta has also become increasingly popular in recent years, sparking creative writing communities, which means that it often takes the shape of more traditional short stories or flash fiction. Smile.jpg, however, is an example of more 'traditional' creepypasta, that is, pieces of text – sometimes accompanied by images or videos – created by one or more anonymous author/s, typically as a message-board collaboration. It is not least the message-boards of 4chan and Something Awful that are known for their creepypasta production, and according to the website *Know Your Meme*, it is likely users of 4chan that are behind *The Curious Case* (Brad and Saboooom 2014). This idea is supported by Mr. L. himself, as he makes a tongue-in-cheek remark about how he often visits 4chan, while describing how the message-boards of Something Awful were once flooded with the image of Smile.jpg, cursing the users of the boards.

  For picture, see page: 101.

Welcome to Night Vale (Jeffrey Cranor and Joseph Fink: 2012 – present)

Welcome to Night Vale is a twice monthly, American podcast created and produced by Joseph Fink. It is written by Joseph Fink and Jeffrey Cranor.

At the time of writing, *Welcome to Night Vale* is one of the most popular and well-known American podcasts. It has toured the world with live performances, and Fink and Cranor have written a bestselling novel based on the podcast.

Welcome to Night Vale takes the form of a community radio-programme for the small desert town of Night Vale. The radio-host Cecil Palmer, voiced by Cecil Baldwin, reads the news, which vary from the mundane to the fantastical. Night Vale is ruled by menacing government agencies, a secret police and a City Council that does not seem completely human. Dinosaurs appear in the middle of the street, ghosts haunt the stadium, Cecil's bosses appear to be monsters that would probably be at home in a story by Lovecraft, and his cat, Khoshekh, floats next to the sink in the men's toilet.

When quoting from the podcast, I am using the transcripts provided by the website *Cecil Speaks* (links in bibliography). I have removed the emphasis added by the writer and instead added my own, if any. I have not, however, changed the grammar, which means that these quotes use American punctuation.

I am grateful to *Cecil Speaks* for making these transcripts available. The episodes that I will be referring to throughout this text are listed in the bibliography, as are links to the podcast itself.

The Deep Web

In Chapter Three: The Void, I discuss stories concerning the Deep Web, that is, the part of the world wide web that is not indexed by search engines. I do so by

engaging with various online sources, not least blogposts and message-board discussions. It is worth noting that I have not myself been to the Deep Web.

Here is a short introduction to the various sources:

4chan/x/: 4chan is an online community with various different message-boards. Many mainstream internet phenomena can be traced back to 4chan, and when it comes to the production and circulation of creepypasta, 4chan is also well represented. While gathering material for this text, I would often visit 4chan/x/, which is the message-board for discussions on subjects of the paranormal. I ended up following a thread on the subject of the so-called Deep Web from February 2013, and this thread is referenced in Chapter Three.

4chan is notorious for its bigotry, and its role in various disturbing cases of bullying, harassment and stalking made me wary of using any materials from the site. In the end, I did decide to reference the 4chan/x/ thread as part of the Deep Web material. What I have done, however, is attempt a rereading and rewriting that disturb and change the 4chan discussion somewhat.

The link to the archived thread that I am referencing can be found in the bibliography.

Girls Who Like Dragons: a blog run by blogger Harlow Clark, who describes herself as "a sci-fi/fantasy writer who loves to crochet...but isn't very good at it" (Clark 2012). I am referencing Clark's post on the Deep Web, 'I have plunged into the Deep Web' (2012).

Clark is not a well-known blogger, and her blog is no longer active, but I chose her post since I like how she engages with the urban legends of the Deep Web. The link to Clark's blogpost can be found in the bibliography under Clark (2012).

Politics in the Zeros: a blog run by American Bob Morris, who describes himself as "interested in the political ramifications of cleantech, climate change,

and the economic crisis as well as leftie, antiwar, and social justice issues".[158] His blog-post 'There be dragons on the Internet, in the Deep Web' (Morris 2013) appeared when I did a Google search on the Deep Web. I decided to refer to his post, not because he is a well-known blogger, but due to how he brings out the interconnections between the sea and the (deep) web.

A link to Morris' blogpost can be found in the bibliography under Morris (2013).

Technology Personalized: a blog describing itself as "one of the top technology blogs on the web with focus on personal and consumer technology including web tools and gadgets".[159] In Chapter Three, I refer to the article by editor Radu Tyrsina entitled 'The Deep Web: The Place Where the internet's Secrets Are'. As with Clark and Morrison, I am not referring to *Technology Personalized* or Tyrsina because they are particularly well-known, but because Tyrsina engages with the Deep Web in a way that magnifies many of the general assumptions concerning this part of the world wide web.

A link to Tyrsina's article can be found in the bibliography under Tyrsina (2013).

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[158] Morris. Link: http://polizeros.com/about/ Last accessed: April 2016.
[159] Link: http://techpp.com/about/ Last accessed: April 2016.

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CORRECTIONS

Well, readers. This has been another day, another night, another bit of time in this bit of space, I say, using our own voice. I'm sitting at my kitchen table, where I've been writing most of this, my feet planted on grey linoleum, but in this here, in this now, yes, *here*, *now* I believe that I'm anywhere *but*. I'm above, in the sky above, looking down on cities that exist only on maps, and it's cold out, really cold out.

- 12

Looking up I see the stars and the void, all a little closer than they were before, all still so unreachably distant. I have something of urgent importance to tell you about ghosts and about believing in them, but first I need to offer the following correction: earlier in this text, we indicated – using our voice – that the image called *Smile* was real. We gave descriptions of this image and a background story as well, and we claimed that the picture was cursed. But, as we all know, *nothing* can be fully understood to be real, especially magic tricks and curses. *Smile* is actually called *In the Bush*, and it was created in the city of Norrköping

- 15

by Swedish artist Mia Mäkilä. I first came across the picture in 2009. At that time I was living in Copenhagen and went to see Mäkilä's exhibition 'My Pink Hell' in a local art gallery. Here, the demon girl moved me, and then she *re*moved me, straight into the abyss. And so – suspended in the void – she *told* me what was hiding in the darkness between the trees and in the darkness between the teeth. It had something to do with the future, but I forgot.

Cold.

Two years later, I was at my new work-place – Linköping University - printing out creepypasta-stories, and suddenly I remembered her, the smiling demon girl, and so I printed her picture out, too, and stuck it on my office-door. Sitting alone in the dark on the top-floor of the bus, I went through the stories, waiting for that *other* grin. I had about an hour to look for it, before I'd be back home in Norrköping.

Cold

We affirm again that *nothing* is real, especially magic tricks and curses, and offer our deepest, most humble apologies for the previous, erroneous report.

FRE E ZIN G

Around me, the void is coming alive with bits of the universe. An iceberg glides by, silently, dying embers glittering in its depths. In a dark room on another continent someone has left the TV on. A jumper has been neatly folded and placed on a made bed, and somewhere it snows inside an empty TV-studio. Like I said, I have something of urgent importance to tell you about ghosts, but I will tell it to you later. Or I will tell it to you not at all.

Certainly I will not tell it to you now.