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The Ghost Is a Shell

Marc James Léger

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The Ghost Is a Shell



Connie Nielsen as Diane de Monx and Charles Berling as Hervé le Millinec in Olivier Assayas, *Demonlover*, 2002. Courtesy of Palm Pictures.

“The reason I’m painting this way is because I want to be a machine. Machines have less problems. I’d like to be a machine, wouldn’t you?”
– Andy Warhol

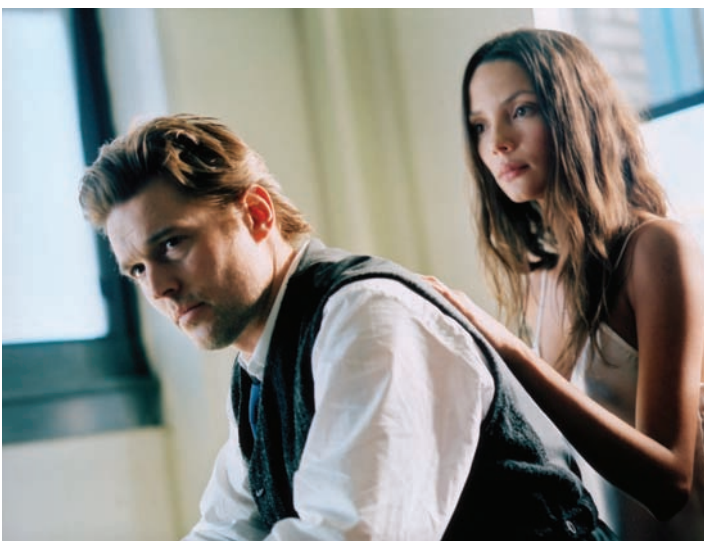
“Sure I have a face and a voice to distinguish myself from others, but my thoughts and memories are unique only to me, and I carry a sense of my own destiny. Each of those things are just a small part of it. I collect information to use in my own way. All of that blends to create a mixture that forms me and gives rise to my conscience.”
– Major Motoko Kusanagi

Consider the different registers in which Terry Eagleton and Slavoj Žižek discuss popular culture in relation to the tasks of critical cultural theory. Eagleton writes: Structuralism, Marxism, post-structuralism and the like are no longer the sexy topics they were. What is sexy instead is sex. On the wilder shores of academia, an interest in French philosophy has given way to a fascination with French kissing. In some cultural circles, the politics of masturbation exert far more fascination than the politics of the Middle-East. Socialism has lost out to sado-masochism. Among students of culture, the body is an immensely fashionable topic, but it is usually the erotic body, not the famished one. There is a keen interest in coupling bodies, but not in labouring bodies. Quietly-spoken middle-class students huddle diligently in libraries, at work on sensationalist subjects like vampirism and eye-gouging, cyborgs and porno movies.¹ Eagleton regrets that today’s cultural theorists have a trivializing view of literature and that authors like Freud cannot be appreciated for their own sake, but as means to shed some light on films like *Where the Wild Things Are*.² In contrast, Žižek writes, «I am convinced of my proper grasp of some Lacanian concept only when I can translate it successfully into the inherent imbecility of popular culture.»³ Whereas for the literary theorist, who is hardly a cultural conservative, popular culture retains its traumatic quality as an obstacle to enjoyment (something that maybe stands in the way of a humanistic alternative to postmodern post-politics), for the Lacanian philosopher, popular culture has no privileged ontological substance, it is merely another indication of the inconsistency of the demands made by the symbolic order, perceived here as the excessive overproduction of images and signs in today’s consumer culture. This shift in attitude can perhaps be compared to the shift from the ethos of the Independent Group, Neo-Dada and Pop artists in the 50s and 60s to that of today’s artists working with Pop Art strategies. Whereas Pop artists were

concerned that the space of high art continue to operate as a privileged space from where one could evaluate and gauge developments in postwar mass cultural society, today’s artists could be thought to perform a fetishistic inversion of these principles, suggesting that art is only art when we treat it as such and that art need not have a status that is essentially different from popular culture.⁴ The cultural artifact in some ways is perhaps only as interesting as the theories and reflections that it gives rise to, or as relevant as the social contexts from which it emerges and contributes to. This would at least be one of the conceits of Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno’s *No Ghost Just a Shell* (1999-2002), a contemporary version of the Surrealist *cadavre exquis* which makes use of a *manga* character to reflect on the contemporary conditions of digital capitalism, intellectual property and neurobiology in a world sometimes defined as post-human.⁵

The project began in 1999 when Huyghe and Parreno acquired the copyright for a melancholic 2D *manga* character that was developed by a Japanese company that sells characters to other companies. This inexpensive character had very few qualities and, had it been incorporated into a *manga* comic, video game or film, would have had a short life. Buying AnnLee—the name they gave the digital file—rescued her from an industry, they say, that had condemned her to death. With the help of Anna Lena Vaney, the artists set up an animation studio in Paris and from there enlisted a series of eighteen collaborators who were to create new lives and narratives for a remodeled 3D AnnLee to inhabit. This collective ‘polyphonic’ work was exhibited in a number of museums and eventually sold *in toto* to the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven in 2003. According to the press release from the exhibition of *No Ghost Just a Shell* at the Kunsthalle Zürich, “It became possible to experience a logic of dialogue and discourse that Parreno sees as an “aesthetic of alliances,” an aesthetic that questions artistic signatures and conventional art presentation models and makes it possible to address current exhibition, authorship and narration models.”⁶

For art critic Philip Nobel, however, the project is more than a platform for artistic community and the perils of copyright in the digital age.⁷ Behind all this is AnnLee, a cute, hopeless avatar that has all of the trappings of what the Japanese refer to as *kawaii*, which means lovable, adorable, darling, or pitiable.⁸ For Nobel, *kawaii* acts as “pop-psychological balm” for a world of abasement, competition, layoffs, and geopolitical irrelevance. Perhaps the most explicit depiction of this guilt-based social conundrum can be found in Takashi Miike’s 2001 film, *Visitor Q*, in which the television reporter Kiyoshi Yamazaki asks repeatedly: “Is this what it means to be a father today?” AnnLee may not be human, but she threatens to tell a story with portent. She is not only a platform



Bill Sage as Jack Bell and Tatiana Abracos
The Girl from Monday in Hal Hartley, *The Girl from Monday*, 2005.
Courtesy of Possible Films.



Connie Nielsen as Diane de Monx in Olivier Assayas,
Demonlover, 2002.
Courtesy of Palm Pictures.

for various artists, but a site of projection, a kind of Hans Bellmer doll for the age of Sarkozy.⁹ And so while the various artistic versions of AnnLee find themselves in rather simple settings, we might wonder what, if anything, her real shift of background from commercial popular culture to museum culture has to tell us, especially in today's ruthless world of free market competition.¹⁰

With the title *No Ghost Just a Shell*, a reference to the Japanese *manga* that became the basis of Mamoru Oshii's 1995 animated film, *Ghost in the Shell*, Huyghe and Parreno claim to have removed the "ghost," which in the Japanese film refers to the consciousness of a futuristic cyborg who is eventually hacked into by the Puppet Master, an artificial life form that started its life as a virus and enters into the scenario as a means to consider themes from brain and evolutionary science. Huyghe and Parreno interrupt and redirect the film's line of inquiry with a curt assertion of *No Ghost* – just a shell. Unlike their late modernist Pop Art precursors, and as art critic Nicolas Bourriaud asserts, the artists are not concerned to question and transgress the limits of art, and unlike their postmodern precursors, the use of a pop cultural reference is not an act of appropriation, but a straightforward examination of notions of authorship through the use of pre-existing works.¹¹ Whereas Bourriaud argues that artists like Huyghe and Parreno merely increase the supply of information, creating endless opportunities for play and discussion by «freeing» a character that does not have the chance of a storyline, critic Tom McDonough counters that the conditions of alienation that their work registers subsume the human subject to «the logic of an integrated spectacle-culture.»¹² Bourriaud's utopia of use, McDonough argues, enacts a fantasy of depersonalization that carries objectification to an extreme.¹³ The ghost of the title, then, could very well be the *Geist* of Hegel's World Spirit and its negation—no ghost—the very expression of the Fukuyaman "end of history."

One of the most prevalent accounts of today's state of end of history biopolitics is that provided by Autonomist thinkers. Inspired by both Marx and Foucault, Autonomist Marxists and "schizo-anarchists" argue that the revolutionary proletariat is today replaced by a post-revolutionary multitude of struggles. The world in which the multitude struggles is not the blue-collar working-class world of industrial factories, but the post-Fordist world of cognitive capitalism, of immaterial and affective labour, in which there is little difference between work and leisure. No wonder then that one of the authors included in the Van Abbemuseum's luxury catalogue of *No Ghost Just a Shell* is Maurizio Lazzarato, one of the high profile Autonomist thinkers who, like Mario Tronti, Antonio Negri and Paulo Virno, has adopted the many of the schizo-anarchist themes developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari.¹⁴ One of the arguments developed by the latter in their collaborative work, *A Thousand Plateaus*, is that the forms of machinic enslavement of contemporary capitalism allow more flexibility for the subject.¹⁵ In today's dynamic order of social relations, there is no centralized power but rather reversible systems of human and machine interaction where the freest subjectivities are those who refine the machinic networks of communication and control. This world of second-order cybernetics, as art theorist Brian Holmes defines it, shifts from a kind of Abstract Expressionist world of negative feedback to a post-Pop universe of positive and flexible interactions in which self-evaluating subjects work to leave behind dominant ethico-aesthetic social patterns. Such molecular revolutions, he argues, nevertheless operate within an integrated world capitalism that seeks to over code subversive experimentation and regulate the effects of exchange and interaction.¹⁶ No wonder then that McDonough is able to claim that the process of 'absolute commodification' nevertheless allows for identification and libidinal cathexis.

Two films that are roughly contemporaneous to *No Ghost Just a Shell* provide a more dramatic version of what AnnLee could have become had she been adapted to the world of feature films. The first of these is Olivier Assayas' *Demonlover* (France, 2002), a film in which an industrial spy named Diane de Monx works undercover for a corporation that trades in illicit 3D manga pornography. As she moves up the corporate hierarchy of the unsuspecting company, her work becomes more dangerous, until, eventually, she murders an executive from a rival American corporation. The company she is spying on, however, has been monitoring her actions and uses this crime to blackmail her

and consequently to subject her to one of their underground projects, a live streaming sadomasochistic torture operation called "Hell Fire." The woman who previously suffered humiliations as her assistant, Elise, now has the upper hand. More than this, we realize that Elise is more efficient in the game of corporate takeovers because she can consider shifting allegiances as merely another one of her job descriptions.¹⁷ This kind of tactical indifference is also what allows her co-worker and superior, Hervé, to think of Diane as the target of his predatory fantasies. In the end, and despite her corporate allegiances, Diane finds herself included in the series that she assumed she could maintain a distance from: the over-exploited world of real and animated porn fantasy. The meaningless world of *animé* and snuff films becomes the very horizon of her experience. A perhaps not so subtle reading of the film, then, is that the everyday work world of late capitalism is just such a meaningless world of machinic enslavement and prostitution in which the minutest aspects of one's personal and private life are subject to technocratic over coding.

If the universe of *Demonlover* was subject to further schizo-anarchist biopolitics, we might encounter something along the lines of Hal Hartley's *The Girl from Monday* (USA, 2005). In a possible future, citizens have "gone public" and are now traded like property on the stock market. This new, revolutionary system is part of the "dictatorship of the consumer" that is brought about by a corporation called the Major Multimedia Monopoly. In order to raise their profiles with Triple M and remain competitive on the job/stock market, people have casual sex but remain emotionally unattached.¹⁸ They groom themselves incessantly, monitor their personal worth and make seduction their main career strategy. Horrified by the success of Triple M, Jack Bell, the ad executive who developed this new market, becomes leader of a counter-revolution in which people resist commodification and make love for its own sake, simply because it feels good. One of Jack's main operatives is William, a teenage womanizer and symbol of hope for the revolution. The twist in the plot comes when Triple M realizes that it can exploit both the regulated economy *and* the underground counter-market. The "Girl from Monday," we later discover, is the name of an alien being that has come to earth to retrieve a long lost compatriot. Jack may or may not be this alien, but like the "Girl" from star 147X (in the constellation Monday), he has become alienated by his imprisonment in a human body. Jack's chances of returning to his home planet, of disalienating desire from the reigning social conditions, thus work as a metaphor for the very utility of desire, sociality and affect within a risk society.

In some important ways we have come back to the themes of *Ghost in the Shell* and its philosophical reflection of neurological brain science and evolutionary science. Do these fields offer an insight into the mysteries of creativity, and if not, do they at least provide some account of the processes of subjectivation within the late capitalist creative industries? The post-political view of today's Deleuzians who argue that it is no longer possible to directly oppose capitalist exploitation rest on what Žižek refers to as a "minimum of political simplification."¹⁹ The foreclosure of class struggle in the form of the multiplicity of struggles through machinic enslavement avoids the trauma of the lack of a radical Left position. In its place anarchist politics avoid the measuring of value in terms of labour time and instead emphasize the tension between the mode of production and the relations of production. What gets left out of this is the category of ideological superstructures, with all that this entails in terms of law, religion, art and philosophy, and of course, no positive role can be envisioned either for workers' parties or for the state. In their place, capitalist productivity is mapped directly onto a social economy but without the radical self-alienation through which it becomes possible for social movements to become conscious of themselves.

This form of ideological mystification finds a parallel in the way that today's schizo-anarchists seek to consider the subjectivation involved in machinic enslavement, but without considering the distinction between subject and subjectivation. The psychoanalytic account of subject formation, in contrast, explains that the subject precedes subjectivation and that the latter actually acts as a defense against the realization of the «castrated» self. The psychoanalytic account, Žižek argues, is in fact consistent with certain branches of brain science and evolutionary cognitivism. The minimal Self may be like a computer screen, behind which there is nothing but neuronal activity, but this virtuality provides

the subject with an interface with the world.²⁰ The question then, Žižek asks, is how to ensure that what we understand as the workings of subjectivity do not simply coincide with the spirit of capitalism. The moment of the «I» which precedes the development of an autobiographical «I» is a recurring moment and its Freudian name is death drive. Drive refers to the movement beyond desire and the pleasure principle and accounts for a subject able to self-sabotage, to uncouple their behaviour from a fully determining outside; it is also the «I» whose fantasies allow it to construct social projects that differ from those that predominate.²¹ In contrast to those whose game it is to posit the synthesis of human and machine, psychoanalysis asserts the precedent of form over content, a view of alienation that accounts for the real subsumption of creative and intellectual labour under capital. One of the challenges facing contemporary

cultural theory therefore is to provide accounts of creativity, intellectual property and biogenetics that are not fully determined by property regimes and from the market mechanisms that make it such that the world in which we live, as Alain Badiou puts it, is not a world.

Marc James Léger

Marc James Léger is an artist, writer and educator living in Montreal. He has published numerous essays in critical cultural theory in various magazines and journals and is editor of the collected writings of Bruce Barber, *Performance, [Performance] and Performers* (YYZ BOOKS, 2007) as well as the forthcoming *Art and Contestation in the New Century*.



Pierre Huyghe and Pilippe Parreno, *No Ghost Just a Shell*, 1999-2002.
Installation view with wallpaper by M/M and video by Pierre Huyghe, *One Million Kingdoms*, 2001.
Courtesy Kunsthalle Zürich. © Photo: Alexander Troehler.

Notes

- 1 Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (London: Penguin Books, 2003) 2-3.
- 2 Eagleton, 87.
- 3 Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: On Women and Causality* (London: Verso, [1994] 2005) 175.
- 4 As Benjamin Buchloh argues about postwar consumer culture, «This new civilization would create conditions in which mass culture and high art would be forced into an increasingly tight embrace, eventually leading to the integration of the sphere of high art into that of the culture industry.» «The real triumph of mass culture over high culture», he continues, «would eventually take place – quite unexpectedly, for most artists and critics – in the fetishization of the concept of high art in the larger apparatus of late twentieth-century ideology.» See Buchloh, «Andy Warhol's One-Dimensional Art, 1956-1966,» in *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art, From 1955 to 1975* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2000) 465-466.
- 5 According to Jan Verwoert, the AnnLee character from *No Ghost Just a Shell* functions in terms of what William Gibson calls a nodal point, «a figure that emerges at the intersection of different discourses as a crystallization of the data that these discourses have generated over time.» Jan Verwoert, «Copyright, Ghosts and Commodity Fetishism,» in Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno, eds. *No Ghost Just a Shell* (Köln: Walther König, 2003) 185.
- 6 For an example of writing that addresses the thematics of cooperation and collaboration in contemporary art, see Liam Gillick, «Maybe It Would Be Better If We Worked in Groups of Three?» *Journal* #2 (January 2009), available at <http://e-fux.com/journal/view/35>. For a more politicized reading of the same, see Christoph Spehr, «Free Cooperation,» *Republicart* (Journal of the European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policy) (2003), available at http://www.republicart.net/art/concept/alttransspehr_en.htm.
- 7 Philip Nobel, «AnnLee, Sign of the Times: Japanese anime comes to life,» *Artforum* (January 2003), available at: http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0268/is_5_41/ai. The matter of copyright as the discursive space in which the character lives and dies was pushed to its limit as the artists arranged with lawyers to transfer to AnnLee the exploitation rights to her own image. This aspect of the project, accompanied by a casket by Joe Scanlan and a farewell fireworks display, effectively cancelled any future licensing rights to the character.
- 8 On this subject, see Sianne Ngai, «The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde,» *Critical Inquiry* #31 (Summer 2005) 811-847.
- 9 Joe Scanlan is perhaps the artist who took the implications of the sadistic, objectifying aspects of the project the furthest. As he states in a self-interview with AnnLee, «Pierre only said that I could do whatever I wanted with you and that I needed the finished version by a certain date.» In her review of the exhibition at San Francisco's Museum of Modern Art, Marcia Tanner pushes this line of thinking and expresses a somewhat doctrinaire feminist critique of the project inasmuch as it invites viewers to project their fantasies on a female tabula rasa – a prepubescent girl no less, which we know to be one of the privileged ciphers of Japanese pornography. What this excludes, however, is the function of the Duchampian readymade in the displacement of the «masculinist» tropes of the Greenbergian account of modernism, a factor that made Warhol's dandyish uses of commodity aesthetics a challenge to the alienated posturing of Abstract Expressionists. Warhol's appropriation of women icons like Marilyn Monroe and Liz Taylor, some have argued, has the potential to draw attention to the plight of these women at the hands of abusive men and an exploitative star system. See, respectively, Joe Scanlan, «Roll Back the Stone: AnnLee Interviews Joe Scanlan,» available at <http://www.thingsthatfall.com/annlee.php>; Marcia Tanner, «Requiem for a Mail Order Bride,» available at http://stretcher.org/archives/r3_a/2003_02_10_r3_archive.php; Amelia Jones, *Postmodernism and the En-Gendering of Marcel Duchamp* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Kenneth E. Silver, «Modes of Disclosure: The Construction of Gay Identity and the Rise of Pop Art,» in Donna DeSalvo and Paul Schmittell, eds. *Hand-Painted Pop: American Art in Transition 1955-62* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1992) 178-203.
- 10 Alain Badiou, *The Meaning of Sarkozy*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Verso, [2007] 2008) 13.
- 11 See Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction: Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World* (New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2002).
- 12 Tom McDonough, «No Ghost,» *October* #110 (Fall 2004) 115.
- 13 McDonough, 126-7.
- 14 Maurizio Lazzarato, «Dialogism and Polyphony,» in Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno, eds. *No Ghost Just a Shell*, 58-73. Lazzarato is a Paris-based philosopher and sociologist whose work examines changing modes of post-Fordist production in an age of immaterial labour, cognitive capitalism and neoliberal biopower. He is one of the founding editors of the French journal *Multitudes*.
- 15 See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).
- 16 See Brian Holmes, *Escape the Overcode: Activist Art in the Control Society* (Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum, 2009) 29-39.
- 17 Note that this kind of flexibility also characterizes the networked communitarianism that today's artworld seems to require. An author would not today wish to uphold a singular position since to represent something is to risk becoming obsolete. As Parreno puts it, «For Björk today, to personify a linear story is a tragedy.» And as Huyghe states, «the fact that some people point to the disappearance of the author to better justify and encourage the circulation of cultural goods is highly plausible.» Cited in *No Ghost Just a Shell*, 18-19.
- 18 The thematics of this kind of disinterested social relations are featured in Steven Soderbergh's 2009 film *The Girlfriend Experience*. In this case as well, the director makes metaphoric comparisons between sexuality, or the libidinal economy, and transnational finance, with the implication that the leading male figures understand the workings of neither.
- 19 Slavoj Žižek, «The Crisis of Determinate Negation,» in his *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2008) 349.
- 20 See Slavoj Žižek, «The Loop of Freedom,» in *The Parallax View* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2006) 205-207.
- 21 Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 231.