

February 16, 2025, a FUSIT sermon by David Salomon titled “**Thinking About Ghosts and Dust**”

Our **opening reading** was written by the surrealist philosopher George Bataille. It is an entry from his *Critical Dictionary* and is entitled *Dust*.

The storytellers have not realized that the Sleeping Beauty would have awoken covered in a thick layer of dust; nor have they envisaged the sinister spiders' webs that would have been torn apart at the first movement of her red tresses. Meanwhile dismal sheets of dust constantly invade earthly habitations and uniformly defile them: as if it were a matter of making ready attics and old rooms for the imminent occupation of the obsessions, phantoms, specters that the decayed odor of old dust nourishes and intoxicates ...

... One day or another, it is true, dust, supposing it persists, will probably begin to gain the upper hand over [us], invading the immense ruins of abandoned buildings, deserted dockyards; and, at that distant epoch, nothing will remain to ward off night-terrors, for lack of which we have become such great book-keepers.

I'll preface my sermon this morning with portions of a poem “Haunted Houses” by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow:

*All houses wherein men have lived and died
Are haunted houses. Through the open doors
The harmless phantoms on their errands glide,
With feet that make no sound upon the floors.
We meet them at the doorway, on the stair,
Along the passages they come and go,*

*Impalpable impressions on the air,
A sense of something moving to and fro.
There are more guests at table than the hosts
Invited; the illuminated hall
Is thronged with quiet, inoffensive ghosts,
As silent as the pictures on the wall.
The stranger at my fireside cannot see
The forms I see, nor hear the sounds I hear;
He but perceives what is; while unto me
All that has been is visible and clear.
We have no title-deeds to house or lands;
Owners and occupants of earlier dates
From graves forgotten stretch their dusty hands,
And hold in mortmain still their old estates.
The spirit-world around this world of sense
Floats like an atmosphere, and everywhere
Wafts through these earthly mists and vapours dense
A vital breath of more ethereal air.*

...

*These perturbations, this perpetual jar
Of earthly wants and aspirations high,
Come from the influence of an unseen star
An undiscovered planet in our sky.*

...

*So from the world of spirits there descends
A bridge of light, connecting it with this,
O'er whose unsteady floor, that sways and bends,
Wander our thoughts above the dark abyss.*

Thinking about Ghosts and Dust

Some things don't go away. They may go missing, but they return. A question my wife's grandmother asked us 40 odd years ago recently came back to me. At least, I think it was her who asked it. Wendy isn't so sure, and now neither am I. Still, someone definitely did ask it, and it is something her grandmother would have said, plus, I love her and Wendy and they both need to be in this story! And, a false memory, just like a dream, can be more powerful (for better and worse) than a "true" one. Either way, this is what I recall her asking:

"Is the dirt you can't see more or less upsetting than the dirt you can see?" We're talking about those dust bunnies behind your heavy couch or under your bed and refrigerator.

I'll repeat the question:

"Is the dirt you can't see more or less upsetting than the dirt you can see? Think about it for a second."

[What do the good people of FUSIT think? Who thinks the dust you can't see is worse?]

I was reminded of this question because I've been thinking about the influence and agency of things that are present but aren't visible, things that are surely there but which you can't fully detect with your senses. Things that you thought were gone but which return. Things that are unwanted yet cannot be eradicated. Things that plague your mind and affect your mood and behavior, if not your worldview. Things that are dead yet endure. In other words, I've been thinking about ghosts and their capacity to haunt one's conscious (one's profession, and one's country).

I emphasize things because a thing, like in the old movies with that title, are ill-formed and unknown and threatening. Call these imperceptible or almost imperceptible things, spirits, call them microorganisms, call them false memories, call them atoms, call them

ideology, call them history, call them dust, call them gods, call them ghosts; all of them, despite their radical differences, produce uncanny, unnerving, unhealthy effects. What do ghosts do if not frighten your mind and threaten your well-being?

I've been thinking about ghosts and invisible forces because I've been writing about them for work. Specifically, writing about the things that are not represented but are present in architectural drawings (things like the air, wind, humidity, dust, soil, clouds, etc.). In a recent essay I argued that when architects don't draw these things they don't think about them, and therefore they don't account for them. The result is a built environment that often neglects the atmosphere, the environment, etc., and favors things that can be more easily seen and touched. And yet, those unseen things don't ever, can't ever, go away. These ghosts haunt the field of architecture, and their return threatens havoc.

Similarly, another set of social specters that never quite went away – fascism, intolerance, racism, sexism – continue to haunt our culture. There are plenty of ghosts hiding in the back of our disciplinary and cultural closets.

In architecture, this can be understood as a medium problem. As in, conventional architectural drawings are not a good medium for representing environmental issues, that is, they can't communicate the presence of the things that our visual apparatus can't detect by itself; physical stuff like water vapor and heat, but also non-physical things like the histories and current ideologies of a place. For that one needs different media, one more like a spiritualist medium who can speak with the past, with the dead, and with the invisible physical forces that influence our lives.

There are plenty of these invisible forces, and plenty of media used to detect and depict them. Science has them. Art has them. Religion has them. The need, and the desire, to

understand what we know to be around us – atoms, history, gods, dust that we cannot see without the help of specific mediums, instruments, and modes of representation - link these disparate ways of knowing the world with one another. They can all be understood as searching for these specters (these ghostly presences) and trying to understand them so that they can enlighten rather than frighten us. One needs mystics (priests) and scientists and historians, and artists (and their specific mediums) to discover, understand, and represent the cultural and natural histories that define the world we find ourselves in.

In my dubious recollection of events, Wendy's grandma Ward asked her question about dirt and dust in an oft-frequented Chinese lunch buffet on Route 27 somewhere between New Brunswick and Princeton, NJ. The food was good, the \$3.99 price was great, and the company priceless. It was myself, Wendy, grandma Virginia, and her aunt Violet (Virginia's sister). We were in our 20s, they in their 70s. It was a frequent occurrence these meals. We would often go galivanting with them. It was not done out of some obligation. They were a joy to be with.

Virginia Ward was a gift. One of twelve kids. Tenant farmer's daughter. Farmed out to a family as a maid at 12. She was whip smart, as were her three kids. Non-sentimental, non-nostalgic, but caring. She liked to get things done. She was straightforward but not an inch rude. She let you know what she thought but without being mean. This was true even after she lost her speech to a stroke. So many of her sayings still make us smile, "boy, boy, money, money?" "I can't tell you that ...," "All the time good ..."

She was fastidious. She was organized. "Go to the hutch, on the left, second drawer from the bottom, back right, under the sewing kit, next to the rubber bands, grab me two red thumbtacks from the pad." Everything had a place, and she knew everything.

It was clear what her answer to her question was (or would have been): the dirt you couldn't see was maddening. If you could see it, then you could eradicate it. But that

dust that she just knew was behind the hutch was maddening. Yet, it was also out of reach until someone came to help her move it or the couch or the bed.

This is part of the power of the things unseen yet present, of ghosts; they are there but they can't so easily be eliminated. Such things, the ones you can't see (or feel, or touch, or taste, or hear, or understand) are resilient, often more resilient, than the things you can. Sometimes one just must live with them, haunted by the fact that there is nothing one could immediately do to exorcise them. One can come to peace with this, or one can be maddened by it.

Which doesn't mean you can't do anything. You can try to behave in a way that limits the dirt and dust. You can regularly, diligently, remove the dust you can see. And, every once in a while, you can move the furniture, get down on your knees, get out your elbow grease and remove the grime.

Of course, sometimes even that won't work. You can't, or don't know how to get rid of certain stains, certain ghosts. For that you might need a special cleanser, tool, or even a professional. Technologies and media of all kinds are what humans have created to extend our physical capacity and sensorial apparatuses. Telescopes and microscopes are early modern examples of such devices, revealing all sorts of invisible yet powerful things. In the essay I wrote that inspired today's musing, I call for a new mode of architectural drawing to try and incorporate the many unseen actors present in the world. Where phantoms were, facts shall be.

In that piece, I riff on the double meaning of medium, that is, as both an artistic, representational technique, and as an agent with the ability to speak with spirits. Both practices (drawing & spiritualism) claim to have the capacity to represent and communicate with things that at present but would otherwise go unrecognized without the intervention of a device or expert who is able to translate the language of the

beyond, of the unknown into the known. That's what we ask of artists, of scientists, of historians, of priests (and of grandparents). They are all mediums. And so are we all when we remember and embody the lessons (good and bad) of our own ancestors.

And yet, and yet, even with the right tools everybody knows that just because you occasionally access the space under the refrigerator, that dirt (both real and metaphoric) are going to come back again. Why bother moving the refrigerator? You know why to bother, because if you don't it will be a much bigger mess, it might turn into mold, it could be dangerous. It also might lead to bad habits. And, it will be an exponentially harder task to take care of it.

The surrealist philosopher George Bataille understood that dust always threatens to take over. Other unwanted (repressed) things return as well. They recently have. Toxic masculinity has come back. Fascism has come back. All kinds of intolerance and hate have come back. Anti-intellectualism has come back. These things – like the atmosphere around a building - return because they never went away in the first place. Still, if you don't move the furniture every once in a while, if you don't insulate your walls, if you take an attitude of “what you can't see won't hurt you,” if you don't have a moral education, if you refuse to believe in the presence of unseen things, of ghosts, then the filth, the disorder has the chance of gaining the upper hand. One needs to be diligent to prevent them from taking over. Virginia Ward understood this well.

One might reply: Why not just get rid of dust and dirt once and for all? Why not exorcise our ghosts? Expose them to light, to bleach, to the vacuum cleaner. Or, live in such a way that you don't generate any dust, any conflict? Is that possible? Having less, yes, but none? That seems impossible, if even desirable.

The dirt behind the couch, the dust on the shelves, the moisture in the air, the apparitions of intolerance cannot be permanently eradicated. Attempts to do so come at the cost of a sterility that must be violently enforced. Does anybody want to live in a hospital operating room or in the clean-room of a microchip factory? No, but nobody wants to live in a garbage dump either. Neither are spaces for a healthy life, a healthy culture, to exist in. One needs to be diligent, but one also needs to be realistic. It's the nature of ghosts to return; it is our obligation to not let them gain the upper hand.

Even if she never asked us the question this talk began with, like everything else in her apartment, I'm sure Virginia Ward knew where the unseen dust lived. She didn't need to see it to know it. Intuition and experience are good teachers. She (and we) know where our ghosts are. I can imagine her saying, perhaps to a young child, "Go in the bedroom, get down on your belly and take the hose of the vacuum and clean under your bed." Go find your ghosts, confront them, use or invent the tools you need to take care of them, with the knowledge that you will have to do so over and over and over again. As I said, she was a smart person and she is a wise, friendly spirit, one for whom I hope I have functioned as a useful medium in presenting her (and other specters) to you this morning. May we all collectively have such helpful ghosts – and vacuum cleaners - in our closets, and may we not be afraid to use them.

Our closing words this morning are from Rae Armantrout and her poem *Unbidden*

The ghosts swarm.

They speak as one

person. Each

loves you. Each

has left something

undone.

Did the palo verde

blush yellow

all at once?

Today its edges

are so sharp

they might cut

anything that moved.

The way a lost

word

will come back

unbidden.

You're not interested

in it now,

only

in knowing

where it's been.