

The Revenge of Fiction in New Languages of Protest: Holograms, Post- Truth, and the Literary Uncanny

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Abstract

This essay probes the political force of the fictional in new languages of protest. It centers on recent demonstrations in various cities that used holograms to oppose the criminalization of protest, state control of public space, or violation of people's land. The hologram protests fostered a spectral space, in which the hierarchical opposition between fiction (as non-serious, trivial) and reality was redrawn differently. They thereby

issued a critique of neoliberal governmentality and an unexpected challenge to post-truth politics. If post-truth rhetoric invites people's "willing suspension of disbelief" by simulating facticity to produce "felt truths," the hologram protests functioned as Freud's "literary uncanny": they reintroduced the conflict between fiction and reality as a condition for critique in a post-truth era.

Debates around the contested notions of fact and fiction have never been out of fashion. In recent years, however, the discursive regime of what has been dubbed “post-truth” has brought these debates to the foreground of politics and shifted their grounds. The collocation “post-truth politics” is part of common parlance since its use surged in the context of the 2016 US presidential election and the EU referendum in the UK resulting in the Brexit vote in June 2016. Under the influence of social media and populist movements, a “crisis of facts” has been unfolding, which some view as a transition “from a society of facts” to a “society of data”: data that through “smart technologies” can sense, produce, and analyze “public sentiment” (Davies, n. pag.). In a post-truth era, “objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (“Oxford Dictionaries Word,” n. pag.).

The association of post-truth politics with populism, conspiracy theories, and a rhetoric of hatred against others, leads many to view the era of post-truth as “the beginning of the end of politics as we’ve known it in existing democracies” and “the harbinger of a new ‘totalitarianism’” or “populist dictatorship” (Keane, n. pag.). Post-truth politics certainly dovetails with the current neoliberal governmentality of crisis in several Western societies, which mobilizes crisis rhetoric to legitimize states of emergency, anti-immigration measures, biopolitical control, austerity politics, or the curtailing of civil rights in the name of order, security or protection from purported “barbarian enemies.”

Several journalists and scholars have viewed post-truth as the offshoot of a postmodernist mindset that rejects absolute or objective truth and the existence of reality as such (Nicholls 6). Post-truth is either cast as a logical continuation or as the “dark and messy side” of postmodernism (Keane, n. pag.). French think tank executive Bruno Tertrais, for example, tweeted that “postmodernism and French intellectuals paved the way for ‘post-truth’ and ‘alt-facts’” (qtd. in Nicholls 6) and American philosopher Daniel Dennett argued in an interview that postmodernists “are responsible for the intellectual fad that made it respectable to be cynical about truth and facts” (qtd. in Cadwalladr, n. pag.). These recent attacks on postmodernism as a harbinger of post-truth politics

often stem from an attachment to a specific notion of truth as based on hard facts. Any deviation from, or confusion around, this notion of truth is considered to be of the same (postmodernist) kind (Keane, n. pag.). In other words, either you believe in objective truth or you are a postmodernist. The antidote to post-truth rhetoric, according to many of these critics, can thus only be truth itself (Keane, n. pag.).

If postmodernist theory and literature generally pursued a pluralization of perspectives in the face of essentialist and authoritative worldviews, it is ironic that this attempt is now held responsible for the demagogic and anti-democratic phenomenon of post-truth politics. In fact, however, post-truth rhetoric does not disavow the idea of truth. Its claims are usually as absolute and essentialist as they can be: in the Brexit campaign, Syrian refugees were invariably cast as barbarian hordes threatening Europe with an unprecedented invasion; and Mexicans, according to Donald Trump, are “bringing drugs” and “crime” to America and are “rapists” (qtd. in Neate, n. pag.). Truth in the post-truth age has not exactly become invalidated or irrelevant, as many have argued, but the mode of its production and its understanding have shifted: it is generated as *affect* or *public sentiment*.¹ This understanding of truth has been captured by the terms “felt truth” or “truthiness.” “Truthiness” was coined by comedian Stephen Colbert in 2005 to describe “things that a person claims to know intuitively or ‘from the gut’ without regard to evidence, logic, intellectual examination, or facts” (“Truthiness,” n. pag.). The collocation “felt truth” is used by the German Language Society (*Gesellschaft für deutsche Sprache*) in their description of the German equivalent of “post-truth” – “postfaktisch” – which was chosen by them as “word of the year” in 2016: “in the ‘post-factual age,’” the recipe for success is the ability to produce a “‘felt truth’” (*gefühlten Wahrheit*) (“GfdS wählt,” n. pag.).

The new relation between fact and fiction in post-truth rhetoric calls for novel critical responses beyond mere fact-checking. Forms of critique (including traditional critiques of ideology) that seek to expose the “facts” behind the “fiction” or the true interests behind ideological

¹ According to *Oxford Dictionaries*, truth in the post-truth era “has become unimportant or irrelevant” (“Oxford Dictionaries Word,” n. pag.).

masks are inadequate as strategies of countering a rhetorical regime that produces its own forceful “truth” as affect. How can resistance to populism and to the neoliberal rhetoric of crisis become effective without resorting to an essentialist distinction between fiction and facts? An answer could perhaps be sought from the other side of “truth”: that of fiction. This essay ponders this question by taking a somewhat unusual route. Posing that not every questioning of the fact/fiction divide rests on the same ground or has the same performative potential in the political sphere, I explore how the *fictional* can partake in critiques of neoliberal politics in terms that counter those of post-truth. To that end, I draw attention to new languages of protest against different aspects of neoliberal governmentality, in which the relation between fact and fiction is recast.

Particularly, I probe recent events that used holograms instead of actual people to protest against the limiting of democratic freedoms, criminalization of protest, expulsion of dissenting bodies from public space, or violation of people’s land. My primary focus is the first hologram protest organized in Madrid in front of the Spanish Parliament in April 2015. This so-called “ghost march” set out to oppose the Law of Citizen Security, which restricted Spanish citizens’ freedom of assembly and expression in the name of security and crisis management. This event was succeeded by other hologram protests, for example in Seoul and Toronto. To probe the political performativity of holograms in these protests, I compare and contrast them to popular uses of holograms in entertainment and the music industry. The hologram protests, I argue, put forward a form of resistance that unsettled the boundaries between fiction and reality, materiality and immateriality, without, however, invalidating the distinction between the two. In fact, they used the boundary between fact and fiction to turn fictionalized acts of protest into sources of political power when real protest was forbidden or suppressed. They thus fostered a spectral space, in which the traditional binary between fiction (as non-serious, politically irrelevant, relegated to entertainment) and fact was both contested and redrawn on a different basis. Through this redrawing, fictionalization and spectralization emerged as forms of political agency. The spectral subjectivity the holo-

gram protests generated, both enacted and opposed politically enforced forms of dispossession of citizens.² By probing the political potential of the fictional in these protests, I argue that this holographic language of protest issues not only a critique of neoliberal governmentality but also an unexpected challenge to post-truth politics.

Holograms in Political Protest

On April 10, 2015, a demonstration took place in front of the Spanish Parliament in Madrid. Instead of people, the protest was held by holographic projections of protesters, constituting the first virtual protest in history. This “ghost march” was organized by No Somos Delito (“We Are Not Crime”), a platform comprising over one hundred associations, including lawyers, migrant rights groups, environmental and human rights organizations, and several groups associated with the 15-M movement in Spain. The 15-M, also known as the Indignados Movement, emerged in 2011 from the social discontent following the financial crisis in Spain. The movement opposed the government’s austerity policies through large-scale protests and occupations of public spaces as well as through digital platforms and social media (López 8). In March 2015, the ruling People’s Party in Spain passed the Law of Citizen Security in order to limit public protest and consolidate control of public space. The hologram protest was directed against this law. The law imposed exorbitant fines for disseminating footage of law enforcement officers during protests and for unauthorized protests or for convening near key infrastructure and government buildings.³ The law was pejoratively dubbed “*Ley Mordaza*” (“Gag Law”) by its critics and was widely condemned within Spain and internationally.

No Somos Delito (NSD) carried out the hologram demonstration with the support of media professionals, which saw the new law as an

² Some parts of the analysis of the Spanish hologram protest in the present article can also be found in Boletsi, “Towards a Visual Middle Voice.” In that article, which takes the ghost march in Spain as its main case study, I examined this protest as a case of visual middle voice. The way the protest recast the fictional was addressed in that article too, but this aspect is here substantially expanded and reframed in the context of post-truth politics.

³ For an outline of the sanctions this law involved, see Kassam, n. pag.

attempt to limit democratic freedoms, criminalize protest, and control the movement of bodies in public space. For months before the protest, NSD ran the website ‘Holograms for Freedom’ (hologramasporlalibertad.org), where people could upload written comments, voice messages, or images of their faces, many of which were later incorporated in the protest that was filmed and projected. About 18.000 people left a hologram image or message on the website (López 9-10; Flesher Fominaya and Teti, n. pag.). The protest was filmed in a town close to Madrid, and on April 10, 2015, the protesters were projected as holograms in front of the Parliament. Members of the press taking interviews from NSD activists also appeared in real time as holograms on another screen (López 10).

The “Gag Law” exemplified the current use of “crisis” as a means of minimizing critique. “Today crisis,” Giorgio Agamben argues, “has become an instrument of rule. It serves to legitimize political and economic decisions that in fact dispossess citizens and deprive them of any possibility of decision” (n. pag.). The name of this law—Law of Citizen Security—demonstrates how the governmentality of crisis legitimizes authoritarian measures and securitarian power in the name of safety and protection. The law aimed at foreclosing dissent by (quite literally) foreclosing the space where dissent could be expressed. Outsmarting this attempt, the hologram protest used a hybrid discourse in mixed media (image, language, sound) to introduce a spectral subjectivity, in-between the real and the fictional, presence and absence, which turned *fictionalization* and *dispossession*—as holographic subjects dispossessed of their bodies—into a form of political agency.

Since the ghost march in Spain, other hologram protests have taken place around the world.⁴ The “ghost rally” held in the South Korean capital Seoul on February 24, 2016, had a comparable motivation and was directly inspired by the protest in Spain. Organized by Amnesty International Korea, this demonstration opposed the South Korean administration’s “increasing crackdown on free speech” that was lead-

⁴ I am grateful to my MA students Lisa Walraven and Emma Lindens for alerting me to these other hologram protests in the context of our class on ‘Literature, Crisis and the Contemporary’ at Leiden University.

ing to the banning of more and more public protests in central Seoul (Kang, n. pag.) and to the use of excessive force by the authorities to crack down on protests (“South Koreans Stage,” n. pag.). The ghost protesters marched across a transparent screen near the gate of Seoul’s historic Gyeongbokgung Palace at Gwanghwamun Square, chanting slogans such as “Public space must be open to the public!” (Starrs, n. pag.). “We wanted to show that the situation has become so restrictive that only ghosts like these may freely march on the street,” director of Amnesty International Korea Kim Hee-jin said in an interview (qtd. in Starrs, n. pag.).

Holograms also took center stage in another protest in Toronto on November 17, 2017. This protest was organized by Greenpeace Canada outside the headquarters of TD Bank. Activists projected 15-foot high holograms of several members of the Kwantlen First Nation in Langley. A Greenpeace banner was placed under the holograms with the message “Stop financing tar sands pipelines.” Members of the indigenous Kwantlen community spoke as holograms to demand that the bank stops financing Kinder Morgan’s Trans Mountain Pipeline expansion (Gathercole, n. pag.). According to Kwantlen member Brandon Gabriel, their concern was that the pipeline would cross the Fraser River at a short distance from the traditional fishing grounds of the Kwantlen community, which is dependent on fishery for their subsistence and “for ceremonial purposes” (qtd. in Gathercole, n. pag.). The larger concern of the Kwantlen Nation was the industry’s impact on the communities and on ecology in Northern Alberta: the damage to the environment and to the health of communities due to the sourcing of hazardous material that is transported through the pipeline and the toxins released into the air as a result (Gathercole, n. pag.).

The protest evokes the much larger mobilization in the U.S. against the Dakota Access Pipeline project, known as the “Standing Rock Protest.” The latter protest was launched in 2014 by the Standing Rock Sioux tribe with the purpose of protecting their land and water sources from being contaminated by the pipeline that would carry oil from North Dakota to Illinois. In the Toronto protest, holograms were deployed to voice comparable ecological concerns and assert the visibility

of this indigenous community in the land through which the pipeline was scheduled to pass. As I will show, these holograms performed and simultaneously resisted the violent dispossession of indigenous people and their lands in the colonial past and neocolonial present.

Keep Calm, It's Only Fiction!

When we trace the grounds on which the authorities granted permissions for most of these events, we stumble upon a striking convergence in the rallies in Madrid and Seoul. The Madrid protest was allowed only because it was announced as a film shoot by NSD, not a public demonstration; hence, a *representation* of a protest, framed as film, art, fiction. As Cristina Flesher Fominaya, spokesperson for NSD, stated: “We were only able to do it because we got a film shoot permit. Protesting in front of parliament is forbidden [...] so a protest permit would not have worked” (Flesher Fominaya and Teti, n. pag.). The protest could only be realized under the guise of fiction.

The same “trick” proved necessary for realizing the protest in Seoul. The first request by Amnesty International Korea to hold a live (human) demonstration was rejected by the Seoul Metropolitan Police. Consequently, as Jenny Starrs reports, the organizers “tweaked their event and reported it as a ‘cultural activity’” (n. pag.). The police warned the organizers that the rally could only be held if it was “strictly a cultural festival” and that crossing the line to a political demonstration would have serious consequences (Kang, n. pag.). “If the event includes chanting indicative of a collective expression of opinion, it can be considered as a demonstration, and this means the rally would be illegal because the organizer did not report it in advance,” stated the Seoul police commissioner the day before the virtual demonstration (Lee Sang-won, qtd. in Starrs, n. pag.). The BBC reports that some officials had warned of a “stern response” on the grounds that “the rally’s application was submitted incorrectly” (“South Koreans Stage,” n. pag.). “Incorrectly” likely refers to the event’s framing as a “cultural activity,” which these officials may have suspected to be a ruse by the organizers.

What is it about this switch of framing that allowed both demonstrations in Madrid and Seoul to take place? Why would the frame of fiction or culture, from the perspective of the authorities, blunt the protest's political edge, thus rendering it permissible? In J.L. Austin's speech act theory, which explores the ability of language to perform acts through words, speech acts in fictional settings are considered non-serious and therefore not worth considering as instances of linguistic performativity. Austin ostracizes fiction from his theory in the following terms:

A performative utterance will, for example, be *in a peculiar way* hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or introduced in a poem, or spoken in a soliloquy. [...] Language in such circumstances is in special ways—intelligibly—used not seriously, but in ways parasitic upon its normal use. (22)

Extending this reasoning to the visual realm, the representation of a protest in a film shoot—which was how the Madrid protest was presented to the authorities—would not be perceived as a serious act (an *actual* protest), just as an actor's promise on stage, in Austin's view, is not a serious speech act. Austin's use of the words "hollow" and "void" to describe fictional acts finds ironic resonance in the hollowness of the holograms.

The non-seriousness of literature and art as fictional modes of expression purportedly hollows out their political potential, making them less threatening to hegemonic power. The protest organizers in Madrid capitalized on this preconception in order to ironize state discourse and bypass its restrictions. The same rationale underlies the rally's framing in Seoul: if the organizers tricked the authorities by presenting the rally as a cultural event, the qualifier "cultural" was supposed to detach the rally from the sphere of politics, revamping it as fiction and/or entertainment. If "serious" activities such as protests are prohibited, fiction (in literature, film, or other forms of cultural expression) retains its freedom, to use Jacques Derrida's phrasing, to "*say everything*" "*in every way*" or, in this case, to *show* everything (36; original emphasis). For Derrida, literature's freedom gives it the power to "defy or lift the law" and thus allows "one to think the essence of the law" (36). By using this freedom

to dodge the state's legislation, the protests in Madrid and Seoul addressed the way this legislation curtailed democratic freedoms.

Derrida acknowledges that literature's freedom is double-edged: a "powerful political weapon but one which might immediately let itself be neutralized as a fiction. This revolutionary power can become very conservative" (38). The power of literature and art to intervene in political and social realities can be diminished because "it's only fiction." The divergent reception of Madrid's hologram protest by local and international media showcases this double-edged potential of fiction. In the Spanish media the event did not attract much attention; the media reduced its significance "by transforming it into a minor entertainment anecdote" (López 10). Without addressing its critical or political content, they focused on its technical innovation and entertainment value (10). However, international media covered it extensively as a political intervention. As López reports, "[i]t was on the front page of *Le Monde* as 'The Story of the Day,' in the *Independent* and the *New Yorker*, and on CNN" and the event's coverage sparked international criticism of Spain's new law: "On April 16, the *Boston Globe* published an editorial claiming 'Virtual speech trumps Spain's gag law,' and the *New York Times*, on April 22, condemned 'Spain's Ominous Gag Law'" (10).

In Madrid, citizens being pushed out of public space resisted by fictionalizing themselves. The activists in Seoul similarly branded their resistance as "cultural," and thus as belonging to a fictional realm separate from the "seriousness" of politics. This understanding of *culture* as distinct from socio-political reality invests it with the kind of ambivalence that Derrida ascribes to literature: potentially subversive and/or trivial. Probing culture's relation to the political, Fredric Jameson hints at this double-edged potential of culture by asking: "Can culture be political, which is to say critical and even subversive, or is it necessarily reappropriated and coopted by the social system of which it is a part?" (xv). To tackle the question, he brings in Herbert Marcuse, the great utopian thinker of the 1960s:

Marcuse argues that it is the very separation of art and culture from the social—a separation that inaugurates culture

as a realm in its own right and defines it as such—which is the source of art’s incorrigible ambiguity. For that very distance of culture from its social context which allows it to function as a *critique and indictment* of the latter also dooms its interventions to ineffectuality and relegates art and culture to the *frivolous, trivialized space* in which such intersections are neutralized in advance. (xv; emphasis added)⁵

Distinguished from the “real” or “serious” realm of politics, both culture and fiction are deemed “ineffectual” but also potentially “critical and subversive.” In the hologram protests, these two antagonistic forces—triviality versus critical potential—actually turned into *synergetic* forces that enhanced the protests’ critical thrust. The perceived triviality of these fictional protests (from the perspective of the authorities) allowed their organizers to circumvent the restrictions of “serious” discourses and intervene in public space. Despite attempts to neutralize the critical potential of the protests in Madrid and Seoul by relegating them to the “trivialized space” of culture or fiction, fiction—the abjected other of Austin’s theory—came back with a vengeance to haunt political discourse and expose its repressive logic.

Spectral Bodies, Spectral Temporality

The holographic fictionalization of citizens’ bodies evokes Jean Baudrillard’s notion of the *simulacrum*.⁶ However, these holograms functioned very differently from *simulacra* in the meaning the term took since Baudrillard turned it into a hallmark of the postmodern era. Following Baudrillard’s thesis in *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), in the era of late capitalism, simulacra are signs that stand on their own without reference to an original or any relationship to reality, thus invalidating the distinction between representation and reality. By contrast, the demonstrators’ holograms drew attention to their *missing referents*: the bodies

⁵ Marcuse develops this argument in his essay “On the Affirmative Character of Culture,” included in *Negations* (1968).

⁶ Baudrillard devoted a section in *Simulacra and Simulation* to the notion of the hologram (105-9).

banned from participation. Instead of obliterating the line between the real and fictional or the object and its representation, they confounded it but retained it. They thus re-politicized the fictional (holograms) by emphasizing its *difference* from the real (human bodies).

Instead of the simulacrum, then, I propose the figure of the specter to probe the performativity of the hologram protests in the political. The vocabulary of ghostliness helps us explore how these protests interwove the fictional and the real while keeping the two distinguished. Owing to the publication of Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx* (1993), the specter has emerged since the 1990s as a prominent conceptual metaphor in the humanities. The specter's "liminal position between visibility and invisibility, life and death, materiality and immateriality" has been employed to address questions concerning liminal identities, social change, and our relation to history (Blanco and Peeren 2). The hologram protests projected a spectral subjectivity that accommodates "competing epistemological [...] positions" (Davis 379): real and fictional, serious and non-serious, present and absent, politically powerful and impotent. The cohabitation of these contradictory states in the holograms fostered a fictional space of possible impossibilities: a third space of resistance to neoliberal governmentality. This space took shape through a radical form of *dispossession*.

Judith Butler lays out the double meaning of dispossession as an "existential category" and "a condition of induced inequality and destitution" (20).⁷ Dispossession captures an existential condition of not "owning" oneself, because the self is formed, as well as undone, by others (3). But it is also a condition of "enforced deprivation of rights, land, livelihood, desire or modes of belonging" (Athanasίου, in Butler and Athanasίου 5). In the framework of neoliberal capitalism, dispossessed individuals are deprived of their rights, jobs, and dignity. They are impoverished, marginalized people or bodies not recognized as citizens, such as illegal migrants. Enforced dispossession entails a form of "non-being" (19): it makes people disposable, indebted, exploited, vulnerable, illegal.

⁷ Butler uses these descriptions to convey the double sense of the notion of precarity, but they also apply to the way she casts the ambivalent meaning of dispossession.

Even though enforced dispossession is disempowering, Butler puts forward the “dispossessed subject” as a challenge to the sovereign subject, exploring its potential in forms of resistance to today’s governmental-ity of crisis. Faced with the impossibility of being constituted as a legitimate subject within a political and social order, “the only resistance,” Butler writes, is “a practice of de-instituting the subject itself” (145-6). Bodily dispossession as resistance can take extreme forms, as in public self-immolation or hunger strikes. “Dispossessing oneself” becomes “a way to dispossess coercive powers” and to expose the inhumanity of the machinery that imposes conditions of precarity (Athanasίου, in Butler and Athanasίου 146).

In the hologram protest in Spain, citizens protested as disembodied ghost-like images of themselves, issuing a critique of enforced dispossession resulting from economic precarity and incursion into citizens’ freedoms. At the same time, the holograms fostered a spectral subjectivity, through which they projected dispossession—as the expropriation of one’s body—as a means of resistance to these processes. The protest opposed the expulsion of dissenting bodies from public space without rendering the body irrelevant as an instrument of resistance. The holograms asserted a form of bodily presence *as* and *through* absence. The bodies that were filmed elsewhere and then projected outside the Spanish Parliament, Gyeongbokgung Palace, and TD Bank’s headquarters in Toronto, *were* present at a previous time and place. Their spectral projection highlighted their heterotopic presence. Their “being here” carried a “being elsewhere” and at another time, dirempting the continuity of time and space. In the protest in Spain, the traces of people that participated in the protest’s recording encountered the traces of people who left their images or shouts on the NSD website. The holograms also conjured up specters of Francisco Franco’s dictatorship, a repressive police state marked by severe restrictions of public space. Indeed, the restriction of citizens’ freedoms and of public space in Spain since the crisis in 2008 has been seen as “symptomatic” of “the traces left by Franco’s dictatorship” (López 10). The holograms also dragged the future into the present by projecting a dystopian scenario that contemporary political conditions could lead to: like a scene from a science-fiction movie, the

protests foreshadowed a future in which citizens are fully absent from public space and replaced by holographic versions of themselves.

The non-linear, spectral temporality the holograms introduced was even more pronounced in the protest in Toronto. The holographic members of the Kwantlen First Nation protesting against the Trans Mountain Pipeline expansion conjured ghosts of the colonial past: the massive extermination of indigenous people and dispossession of their lands by Europeans. The “ghosts” of indigenous people outside the TD Bank headquarters evoked this violent history and its traces in the present. Their ghostly presence cast the plans for the pipeline expansion not as an isolated case but as a continuation of the violence against these people for centuries, from colonial to neocolonial times. Native Americans were often cast as ghosts in colonial rhetoric, as their subjectivity was questioned or disavowed (Chen 159). The ghost, however, has an ambivalent relation to power: it can “manifest as a figure of compromised agency” or “appear as a dominant, even sovereign being” (Peeren 3). As holographic ghosts, the people of the Kwintlen First Nation evoked the history of their dispossession and the current trumping of their interests by corporate power. They made their voices heard in the here-and-now by activating the echoes of a violent history that still haunts the present and resonates in current practices.

Post-Truth As Willing Suspension of Disbelief and Holograms As the Literary Uncanny

Holograms may be new to languages of protest, but they are not new to our entertainment culture. In the music industry, they claim an increasingly prominent place since the advent of “live” holographic performances by artists like Tupac Shakur, Michael Jackson, and the crowd-sourced Japanese vocaloid Hatsune Miku. The performance of Tupac Shakur as a hologram at the 2012 Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival, which became a “global media sensation,” was received as a “quasi-religious ephemeral ‘second coming’” of the legendary late rapper, generating “a sense of spiritual co-presence” (McLeod 503-4). Since then there have been many “resurrections” of deceased rappers through

holographic performances, as well as holographic appearances of living artists like Beyoncé and Mariah Carey.⁸ According to Ken McLeod, holograms in music entertainment contribute to a “hybridized mixed reality experience” of music, “a complex blend of the physical ‘real’ and the digital” (501). While these holographic performers still refer to human artists (alive or deceased), Hatsune Miku, a virtual pop-idol adored in (and beyond) Japan, confounds the line between reality and virtuality even more (504). Miku is a fictional character who holds “live” performances as a holographic 3D projection. She is generated by a computer program of the Japanese technology firm Crypton Future Media. This firm controls her voice and appearance but her songs are created from the input of her fans, making her “the virtual embodiment of a collective idea, a meme in human form” (505).

If holograms in music are, to a large extent, incorporated in the matrix of global capitalism and the entertainment industry, how can holograms function effectively in new languages of resistance against neoliberal governmentality without being co-opted by it? Do their functions in these two realms differ? To answer these questions, I compare the experience of reality that holograms produce in the examined cases of political protest and in music performances.

In his analysis of holograms in music, McLeod views holographic performers as manifestations of “‘a techno spiritualism’ that celebrates and fetishizes advances in technological magic” (511). He likens the effect of holographic pop stars to “the quasi-spiritual effects associated with traditional stage magic, tribal shamans, and commercial advertising alike” (511). These performances can thus be viewed as expressions of the twenty-first century desire for a greater, quasi-spiritual truth or order: this “truth” is here produced through the effect of the holograms as “spirits,” often tied to the idea of reincarnation (the Tupac and Michael Jackson holograms are cases in point [512]). McLeod elaborates this argument as follows:

⁸ The Wu-Tang Clan’s *OP Dirty Bastard* and founder of N.W.A. Eazy-E joined performances of surviving members of their groups as holograms, and Michael Jackson also performed a song as a hologram at the 2014 Billboard Music Awards (McLeod 507-8).

As with magicians, shamans, and advertisers, the programmers and creators of holographic performers [...] manipulate our perceptions and create virtual realities that, in turn, impact our construction of reality. [...] [H]olographic performers heighten the notion of a spiritual experience. They present immaterial, evanescent visions, in some sense a visual manifestation of a creation or resurrection myth, the veracity of which is both obscured and enhanced by the complexities of its technological mediation of reality and virtuality. (511)

If creators of holographic performers function as present-day “magicians, shamans, and advertisers,” their creations assume a mystifying function, compatible with the logic of late capitalism: they produce their own quasi-spiritual myth, while obscuring the technological mediation of this myth.⁹ Even though audiences are aware that holographic performers are not “real people,” they willingly submit to the technological illusion that produces the performers as specimens of a higher reality—akin to spirits or semi-gods.

The protesting holograms performed a reverse gesture. By generating a mixed reality experience that contested the real-fictional boundary, they shattered the mystifying workings of capitalism and technology. They did not aim to seduce audiences into experiencing the virtual as real (or higher than real: sublime, spiritual), but projected the absence of real bodies from the protest. Instead of making the public forget their referents and worship them as autonomous signs/spirits, the holograms drew attention to the neoliberal processes that control, restrict, and expel dissenting voices in public space. If neoliberal biopolitics tries to replace protesting bodies with acquiescent holographic avatars (metaphorically speaking), the protesting holograms pierced this neoliberal fantasy. They refused to be part of the “subliminal comfort” Baudrillard

⁹ Even though McLeod’s analysis of music holograms is convincing, his optimistic conclusion that holograms in the music industry become a means of “celebrating and reinforcing our collective humanity through the seemingly artificial” (509) does not adequately consider the mystifying workings of holographic performances in the context of global capitalism.

ascribed to holograms in 1981: part “of this happiness now consecrated to the mental simulacrum and to the environmental fable of special effects,” whereby the social also becomes such a “special effect” (107).

Schematic as it may be, this comparison between holograms in entertainment and political protest helps us better understand how the hologram demonstrations challenge post-truth rhetoric. If holograms in entertainment construct the illusion of presence (albeit a quasi-spiritual presence), making audiences accept their “reality” as an effect even if they are aware of their virtuality, the grounds on which holographic music performers operate dovetail with those of post-truth politics. Post-truth politics has a high entertainment value too: it is, for a big part, a “show” or “public spectacle” “designed” to entertain and manipulate millions of people (Keane, n. pag.). According to Keane, part of the genealogy of post-truth is “traceable to the world of corporate advertising and market-driven entertainment” (n. pag.). Seduction and the *illusion* or *effect* of truth are key ingredients of this “show.” The “meandering rhetoric” of post-truth “is designed to bewitch and beguile,” just as holographic performers seduce audiences into embracing their quasi-spiritual presence as real (n. pag.).

The public in holographic performances is aware that the performers are not real, yet they willingly participate in the illusion, which they experience as reality. This also pertains to the production and endorsement of “felt truth” in post-truth politics. Proponents and audiences of post-truth rhetoric may disregard “truth” or “facts” but that does not mean they are not aware of them. According to the German Language Society, in the post-factual age “[e]ver greater sections of the population are ready to ignore facts, and even to accept obvious lies willingly” (qtd. in Keane, n. pag.). The word “willingly” is key to understanding post-truth as an exacerbation of cynical reason. Slavoj Žižek, drawing from Peter Sloterdijk’s *Critique of Cynical Reason* (1983), considers “cynical reason” as a key trait of our supposedly “postideological” era. According to Žižek, today’s cynical reason can be understood through a reformulation of Karl Marx’s formula for ideology as false consciousness (that is, the idea that people’s understanding of their social reality is false): “they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are

doing it”—that is, “they know that, in their activity, they are following an illusion, but still, they are doing it” (30).¹⁰ People know, for example, “that their idea of Freedom is masking a particular form of exploitation” but this does not prevent them from holding on to this idea (30). Post-truth politics amplifies cynical reason: people’s awareness of the inconsistency or falsity of a statement does not stop them from endorsing it as true if it feels true.¹¹ Viewed in this way, the attitude that post-truth rhetoric seeks to induce—just like the attitude holographic performers invite—is akin to the willing suspension of disbelief that typifies readers of literature. But unlike in literature, people in this case do not return to their reality when they close the covers of a novel knowing that their world is distinct from that of fiction. Post-truth’s suspension of disbelief pertains to people’s *own* reality and their acceptance of “felt truths” even when they know that they are a kind of fiction.

The hologram protests unsettled this suspension of disbelief that typifies post-truth politics. Instead of trying to make the virtual pass as real—in the way that post-truth rhetoric simulates facticity to make statements feel true—they mobilized the virtual to foreground the absence of the real. While acknowledging the interpenetration of reality and fiction in our contemporary experience, they pleaded for a distinction between the two, albeit a shaky one.

Experienced as spirits, specters, or ghosts, holograms often have an uncanny effect. McLeod, for example, finds that holographic performers can trigger “a sense of Freud’s notion of the uncanny in that they manifest a virtual co-presence with both a visual and an aural trace of a larger creative power” (510). In Freud’s theory, the uncanny is generated “from something familiar which has been repressed” (638); particularly, when repressed “infantile complexes [...] are once more revived by some impression, or when primitive beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed” (639). For Freud, such “primitive beliefs” and superstitions belong to a previous phase in humanity’s de-

¹⁰ Žižek ascribes this formula to Marx, but it is worth noting that it was Friedrich Engels who defined ideology as false consciousness in a letter to Franz Mehring from July 1893.

¹¹ This argument that connects post-truth to cynical reason can also be found in Boletsi, “Crisis, Terrorism, and Post-Truth,” 40.

velopment, marked by belief in magic and an animistic conception of the universe. Traces of this phase survive in our unconscious and can be reactivated through a trigger that yields an uncanny experience (633-35). The uncanny effect of spirits belongs to the latter category. Even though “educated people have ceased to believe officially that the dead can become visible as spirits” (635), they can still have an uncanny experience when faced with phenomena that evoke ghosts or spirits. This understanding of the uncanny chimes with McLeod’s reading of holographic performers in music entertainment: the description of their effect in terms of “techno-spiritualism” evokes the version of the uncanny as flowing from (repressed) superstitious or spiritual beliefs.

The uncanny effect of the protesting holograms is of a different kind. The experience they trigger is *demythifying*. It flows from a *conflict* between the real and the fictional: what we expect from a demonstration and what we get clashes with our sense of reality. I therefore propose to approach their effect through Freud’s notion of the *literary uncanny*. The literary uncanny can only be produced against a realistic setting: when the world of a fictional story resembles our reality and we respond to the story “as we would have reacted to real experiences” (641). The intrusion of a strange, unreal, or supernatural element that clashes with the reader’s (or characters’) sense of what is realistically possible can induce an uncanny effect. Conflict between the realistic and the strange, and doubt about the ontological status of an occurrence, are indispensable ingredients for the literary uncanny. By contrast, in fairytales or fantasy novels, where “the world of reality is left behind from the very start” and we accept the fictional world and its “animistic system of beliefs,” there is no place for the uncanny (640). In these stories there is no such conflict or stark distinction between the real and the magical: the willing suspension of disbelief is complete.

The literary uncanny thus requires cracks in the reader’s willing suspension of disbelief, which unsettle our illusion that what we read about is real. Post-truth rhetoric works more like fantasy fiction in Freud’s vision: post-truth depends on a willing suspension of disbelief that allows people to embrace the illusion or sense of facticity as truth. As Freud writes, “the realm of phantasy depends for its effect on the fact that its

content is not submitted to reality testing” (640). Similarly, the effectiveness of post-truth rhetoric is not diminished by fact-checking, because it functions beyond the traditional fact/fiction distinction.

The hologram protests induced an uncanny experience by challenging the terms of this “fantasy” in our realities. Their critical edge and shock-effect stems from their insistence on a difference between real and fictional (holographic) bodies and their introduction of something unreal in the realistic setting of a demonstration. Countering the phantasmagoria of post-truth politics, where the illusion of truth replaces the distinction between truth and falsity, fact and fiction, the hologram protests exposed the strangeness of the reality people are called to accept as the “new normal”: that of a society of control whereby dissenting bodies are disappearing from public space. Their critique showcased the importance of a distinction between fiction and reality on non-essentialist grounds and without the hierarchical downgrading of fiction as trivial and politically irrelevant. They thus shaped a ground on which the line between fiction and reality, materiality and virtuality, can be rethought and mobilized towards new modes of critique to the seductive terms of post-truth politics.

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