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CHAPTER 5

Weirding Europe: Fiction and Ghostliness as Grammars of Resistance in Kivu Ruhorahoza's *Europa*, "Based on a True Story" (2019)

Maria Boletsi

Fictionality ... open[s] the door to understanding haunting. Haunting is a part of our social world, and understanding it is essential to grasping the nature of our society and for changing it.—Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters* (1997, 27)

Living with ghosts, permitting and even exploiting their operation as a deconstructive device, means living with the permanent disruption of the usual oppositions that render our world coherent—between the material and the ideal, the past and the present, the real and the fictive, the true and the false.—Wendy Brown, *Politics out of History* (2001, 146)

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In *Ghostly Matters* (1997), Avery Gordon introduced ghosts and ghostliness into the study of the social world. In his book, Gordon suggests that embracing the fictional as part of the factual is a prerequisite for understanding haunting, that is, for reckoning with ghosts, conversing with them, allowing them to affect and unsettle the coherent experience of our personal or social realities. Fictionality, in other words, enables us to see and listen to the departed or the invisible, dispossessed people leading a ghostly life in the margins of society. By extension, it is an ingredient for unraveling the social fabric and pointing to its errant stitches—in Gordon’s words, for “grasping the nature of our society and for changing it” (1997, 27).

But what mode of entanglement between the fictive and the factual, as well as the ghostly and the fictive, does this reckoning with ghosts call for? How do the entanglements of fact and fiction that allow ghosts to take effect in our social world relate to—and differ from—the kind of entanglement of fiction and facts that we see in the contemporary political landscape in Europe, marked by the mainstreaming of right-wing “post-truth populism” (Harsin 2018) and nativism? How can the fictional contribute to new grammars of resistance to practices of exclusion, racialization, dispossession, and biopolitical control in contemporary European societies?

In this chapter, I address these questions by tracing the entanglements, disentanglements, and re-entanglements of the fictional, the real, and the ghostly as they take shape in the film *Europa, “Based on a True Story”* (2019) by Rwandan director Kivu Ruhorahoza. The film premiered at the International Documentary Film Festival of Amsterdam (IDFA) in 2019, where it was part of the competition for feature-length documentary. Although its inclusion at the IDFA competition suggests its categorization as a documentary, this genre-bending essay film weaves parts of a fiction film titled *A Tree Has Fallen* into a self-reflexive, partly autobiographical documentary. While presenting us with scenes from the movie *A Tree Has Fallen*, the director reflects on the process of making this movie in London at a time of rising racial and social tensions and xenophobic, anti-immigrant attitudes and policies in the UK and, more generally, in Europe.¹ These

¹A previous, first version of the film under the title *A Tree Has Fallen* (the title of the movie within the film in the final 2019 version) only contained the plot of the fiction film, before Ruhorahoza decided to radically modify it, embed it into an essay documentary about the making of this film, and give it a new title. For an analysis of this first version of the film under the title *A Tree Has Fallen* (2018), see Higgins (2019).

tensions are also mirrored in the film-within-the-film: a drama about a love triangle in which Simon, a Nigerian man (Oris Erhuero), returns to London as a ghost “to make amends with Anna, his mixed-race lover (Lisa Moorish) and Bruce, Anna’s white ex-husband (Matt Ray Brown).”²

The film’s final title, *Europa*, “Based on a True Story,” enigmatic as it is, not only hints at the function of London as a metonym for Europe and its recent stringent attitudes to immigration but also brings the film’s entwinement of fiction and reality center stage. The entanglement of the scenes from *A Tree Has Fallen*, and the documentary parts take shape through a blending of modes of filmmaking that broaches the place of the fictional in social reality. The boundaries between the documentary and the fiction parts, both set in London, are porous, as the workings of ghosts become central to both. The film, however, does not seek to invalidate the distinction between fiction and reality: by transgressing the fiction-reality line, just as ghosts as transgressive figures by definition also do, it rethinks this relation by deviating from common understandings of realism, fiction, and their relation to “truth.” Its idiom moves away from representational realism, coming closer to what Graham Harman has termed “weird realism”: an understanding of realism that refutes the possibility of mirroring and directly translating reality into representations, acknowledging instead that “Reality itself is weird because reality itself is incommensurable with any attempt to represent or measure it” (Harman 2012, 51).

If the “truth” of dispossessed people cannot be expressed in a dominant language that denies them subjectivity, social presence, and the right to resist, might the grammars of spectrality and fiction help voice that truth more effectively? This chapter explores the potential of the fictional and the spectral as modes of expression and resistance today against the backdrop of (a) the shifting relation between fact and fiction in the era of post-truth politics, (b) the positivist, purportedly rational, and fact-based discourse of hostile immigration policies in Europe (seeking, e.g., to distinguish “real” from “fake” refugee claims), and (c) the representational realism of documentaries as “the dominant form of visibility assigned to the underprivileged of the Global south” and to the representation of “ethnic and racial others” from Western perspectives (Celik 2015, 134).

Europa explores modes of resistance to processes of enforced dispossession through a juxtaposition between, on the one hand, the ghostly

² From the film’s synopsis on the IDFA website.

presence of the fictional protagonist, Simon, an “illegal” Nigerian migrant in London, and, on the other hand, documentary footage of bodies partaking in public events in London, from anti-Brexit rallies and far right protests to gay pride parades and the Notting Hill Carnival. This juxtaposition is framed by two questions, both posed by the filmmaker in a voice-over: “How do [ghostly subjects] survive the paradox of being invisible in the era of hypervisibility?” and “what does resist mean to those rendered ghostly by an openly hostile immigration policy, those living under the radar?” As I argue, through their distinct forms and different but overlapping perspectives, the documentary and the fiction film invite what Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) called a *contrapuntal reading*: a reading of contemporary London that defamiliarizes the city for European viewers and traces how this metropolitan city, the heart of a former Empire, is marked by conflicting but intertwined histories and multiply haunted by former colonized subjects. This haunting concerns not only pro-Brexit rallies, motivated by imperial nostalgia, but also anti-Brexit protests, carnivals, gay pride parades, and other events that are premised on inclusiveness and multicultural ideals but are still haunted by the exclusion of ghostly subjects, for which public protest is an impossibility.

The contrapuntal reading that the film triggers takes effect precisely through the estranging tension between the fictional parts and the realist mode of the documentary parts. Through the juxtaposition of ghostliness and hypervisibility, as well as through its interweaving of modes of filmmaking, the film rethinks the role of fictionality in modes of resistance to xenophobic attitudes, anti-immigration policies, and neoliberal modes of governance in European societies that produce dispossessed, ghostly subjects.

While the film *contrasts* ghostly subjects with hypervisible bodies in public protests, in this chapter’s final part, I compare the film’s take on fictionality, ghostliness, and resistance with recent protest events, primarily in Europe, that mobilized ghostliness by taking place without human bodies. Although these protests had different motivations, they all tapped into the ghostly and the fictional to develop grammars of critique against processes of dispossession, the absence or exclusion of certain bodies from public space, and the withholding of the right to publicly voice dissent. These new, “weird” grammars of protest, I argue, share the film’s preoccupation with the fictional and the ghostly in order to articulate a different response to “the paradox of being invisible in the era of hypervisibility” that the film foregrounds.

1 THE GRAMMAR OF GHOSTLINESS AND THE STRANGENESS OF ETHNOGRAPHY: READING CONTRAPUNTALLY

When it comes to filmic representations of “the underprivileged of the Global South” in European cinema, Ipek Celik argues, “the documentary continues to be the dominant form of visibility ... instead of genres like the thriller and science fiction” and it often works by casting racial and ethnic others as victims whose suffering becomes “credible for the compassionate spectator” (2015, 134). This trend can be easily detected, for example, in a large portion of cinematic and artistic responses to the declared “refugee crisis” in Europe since 2015. Art responding to the “refugee crisis” relies largely on documentary-like representational modes: it taps, as Anthi Argyriou argues, into “a form of photojournalistic realism,” showing an “inclination towards documentation, towards capturing reality and facts” and seeking to advance the kind of “truth claims traditionally associated with the mode of the documentary” (Argyriou 2021, 53–54).

In the “distribution of genres,” according to Jacques Rancière, the documentary and “the reality of the news” are reserved for the underprivileged, while “the freedom of fiction” is for dominant groups.³ Thus, Rancière continues, if “the world is divided between those who can and those who cannot afford the luxury of playing with words and images,” “[s]ubversion begins when this division is contested” (2007). Picking up on Rancière’s point, Celik expresses the hope “for the visibility of ethnic and racial others as *fictional* characters with more elusive desires as they enjoy the ‘luxury of playing with words and images,’ characters who enable their spectators to experience anew, reflect on, and hopefully alter for the better the current limited palette of affects associated with the multicultural landscape of Europe” (2015, 134). For Celik, when it comes to representations of ethnic and racial others in European films, broadening the palette of *genres* toward more fictional modes might also enable a broadening of “the palette of affects” through which viewers relate to such characters.

³In his interview in *Artforum*, Rancière makes this distinction to talk about Palestinian versus Israeli filmmakers, also referring to Godard’s ironic statement “that epic was for Israelis and documentary for Palestinians” (Rancière 2007; also qtd. in Celik 2015, 134).

Kivu Ruhorahoza's film *Europa*, "*Based on a True Story*" upsets the above distinctions and the terms of the distribution of documentary and fictional modes by reflecting on the frameworks through which films are funded and received by critics and audiences. The film opens with two back-to-back shots, both framing the same landscape similarly, but each using a different camera: a semi-professional one and a professional RED camera. In a voice-over, the filmmaker states that the use of the professional camera kit assures his "professional collaborators" that this is a "serious production" by a "serious and ambitious African filmmaker." Although he always dreamed of making "a Rwandan film set in a European country," in which he would film people "in a quasi-anthropological way" from the position of an African filmmaker, he comes to realize that there is zero funding for feature films by African filmmakers set outside of Africa, and he is urged by friends to stick to making a film "set in Africa with universal themes." Although "a French filmmaker can make a French film set in Zimbabwe or India," since casting a European gaze upon a country of the Global South is a normalized practice, the reverse—a film by an African filmmaker set in Europe—deviates from the film industry's dominant frameworks and threatens to fall through the cracks.

Going against the grain, Ruhorahoza decides to make a Rwandan film about a European city and, by extension, as its title suggests, about Europe. The film—Ruhorahoza's third feature film—deviates in that sense from his first two feature films that were set in Africa, neither of which was categorized as a documentary: *Grey Matter* (*Matière grise*, 2011), a film about the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, and *Things of the Aimless Wanderer* (2015), which broaches the relations between Westerners and "locals" in Africa. There are, however, red threads—also on the level of narrative choices and plot structures—that connect these films with *Europa*. One of these threads is Ruhorahoza's consistent interweaving of different narratives and the blending of fiction and reality. *Grey Matter* is also conceived as a film within a film: it foregrounds the attempts of a filmmaker, Balthazar, to shoot his first feature film, *The Cycle of the Cockroach*, featuring the story of a brother and sister trying to cope with the ramifications of the Rwandan genocide. Echoing the opening reflections of the filmmaker in *Europa*, Balthazar fails to secure funding from government agencies that only tend to fund "upbeat policy-friendly films" and borrows from a loan shark instead. The entanglement between fiction and reality that is staged in *Europa* also permeates *Grey Matter*: as the film progresses and *The Cycle*

plays out on the screen, confronting us with the horrors of political violence and the traumas of the genocide, the viewer cannot easily disentangle the events that actually happened from those unraveling in the characters' minds.⁴

If *Europa* takes on the relations between white Europeans and African immigrants on European ground, *Things of the Aimless Wanderer* sets up two parallel narratives and time-frames (one in the late nineteenth century and the other in the early twenty-first century). It stages, on the one hand, the strange encounter of a white explorer (an "aimless wanderer") lost in the jungle with a black man and a black young woman in the late nineteenth century, and, on the other hand, the erotic encounter of a foreign white news correspondent with a black woman he meets at a nightclub who disappears the day after, and his attempt to find out what happened to her with the help of a local informant.⁵ While this film addresses the problematic, uneasy relation between Africa and the West through the presence of white foreigners in Africa in the past and today, *Europa* broaches these issues through the presence of Africans in London: the Rwandan filmmaker trying to shoot his third feature film in London, and Simon, the Nigerian protagonist of his film *A Tree Has Fallen*.⁶

Europa combines the documentary with the fictional mode. In the film, heterogeneous temporalities intersect in the non-chronologically ordered sequences from the film *A Tree Has Fallen*, which alternate with documentary footage from contemporary London, especially scenes from rallies, public protests, and celebrations. In this hybrid universe, Simon's fictional personal narrative becomes entangled in London's collective history of the present. The elliptical storylines make it difficult for viewers to reconstruct the *fabula* of the fiction film.⁷ Only toward the end does the viewer get to put together some pieces of the puzzle.

This convoluted temporality and temporal sequencing is attuned with the temporality of the ghost, which, following Jacques Derrida, defies

⁴ See also the film's synopsis in the online bibliographic database [africabib.org](https://www.africabib.org/rec.php?RID=391850393) at <https://www.africabib.org/rec.php?RID=391850393>.

⁵ The main characters in both storylines are played by the same three actors. For a synopsis see <https://africabib.org/rec.php?RID=405921276>.

⁶ As *Europa* starts with the filmmaker's reflection on the difficulties of funding for genre-bending films by Africans, we may also recall that *Things of the Aimless Wanderer* was a small-budget film shot on a Black Magic camera ("Kivu Ruhorahoza" 2020).

⁷ I follow Mieke Bal's definition of the *fabula* of a narrative as "the series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors" (2017, 5).

linear time, making the present porous and open to intrusions from the past and the future (Derrida 1994, 48). Owing to this nonlinear temporality, the viewer cannot determine with certainty in which scenes Simon is still alive or a ghost that returns. We do not get to see the whole fiction film, which remains unfinished, as the filmmaker's stay in London reaches an abrupt end due to the UK's hostile immigration policies. Thus, *Europa* registers an unfinished project, just as the ghost, which takes center stage throughout the film, signals unfinished business, an unsettled injustice or "lingering trouble"—to use a phrase by Gordon that the filmmaker also quotes (1997, xix).

The documentary and the fiction parts are multiply entwined. This entwinement, as I will show, is often generated through conflicting images that highlight the paradoxes the film explores: the paradox of being a ghost in a city marked by hypervisibility as well as the entangled histories of a former colonial empire and its colonized subjects, as they haunt contemporary London. The ways in which recorded scenes from London's streets relate to the story of Simon, the Nigerian protagonist of *A Tree Has Fallen*, can be traced through what Said called a *contrapuntal reading*. Opposed to a linear historiography marked by homogeneous perspectives, Said's contrapuntal reading was conceived as a method for tracing the "overlapping community between metropolitan and formerly colonized societies" by probing their "intertwined and overlapping histories" (1993, 18). It is therefore attentive to "the overlapping experience of Westerners and Orientals, the interdependence of cultural terrains in which colonizer and colonized co-existed and battled each other through projections as well as rival geographies, narratives, and histories" (Said 1993, xx). Unpacking the interdependence of seemingly distinct experiences and histories requires a revisiting of the "cultural archive" in order to grasp it "contrapuntally, with a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts" (Said 1993, 51).

In *Europa*, contrapuntal readings are triggered on different levels: (a) through the way Ruhorahoza (as a persona in the film, manifest through the voice-over) "reads" London from his precarious position as an African filmmaker and a foreigner; (b) through the way Simon's fictional narrative invites us to "read" the documentary scenes from the streets of London; and (c) through the way the distinct but entwined experiences of the three protagonists of the fiction film—the Nigerian "illegal" migrant (Simon), his lover (Anna), and her jealous white (ex-)husband (Bruce)—stage the

interdependent histories of former colonized subjects and white Europeans today. These contrapuntal readings, as I will argue, are enabled through the centrality of the *ghost* in the film: a transgressive figure that can cross incongruous worlds, making them more porous. They are also enabled through the *blending of modes of filmmaking*, particularly realist and fictional modes of representation: this blending suggests the impossibility of doing justice to these conflicting histories and perspectives through a single genre. In the film's "weird realism," documentary-style representational realism is haunted by fiction, just as fiction is informed and co-shaped by the social reality in which it intervenes.

In the voice-over that accompanies scenes from both the documentary parts and the fiction film, the filmmaker's personal reflections blend with anthropological observations about London and its people, commentary about the film's plot, African poetry, and philosophical ruminations about ghosts, inspired by Avery Gordon's *Ghostly Matters* (1997). The voice-over's presence evokes its traditional function in expository documentaries as a purportedly objective voice of authority meant to explain, clarify, and unify the visual footage into a coherent narrative (Nichols 2001, 105–107). In the film, however, the voice-over may draw connections between sequences and reflect on the process of filmmaking and the film's social context, but it cannot impose a coherent narrative. Many connections between the fictional and documentary parts remain open to interpretation. Thus, instead of offering an omniscient voice, the voice-over assumes diverse functions that enhance the film's polyphonic character: self-reflexive and personal when it shares the filmmaker's own (partially failed) experience of shooting his film in London; poetic, for instance, when citing a poem about ghosts; philosophical and theoretical in its reflections on ghostliness; quasi-objective in its anthropological observations about London and its people; argumentative, analytical, and critical when tracing the paradoxes and contradictions that mark this former colonial power and its current attitudes toward foreigners. This polyphony also issues from a storyteller that narrates parts of the fiction film in ways that at times correspond with the content of the scenes or fill in narrative gaps, and at times are at odds with a scene's content.

In the film's first minutes, the filmmaker in the voice-over lays out his initial plans for his feature film and sketches the plot he had in mind, announcing this as a film about ghosts:

The story would be set in a European city. And the title would be *A Tree Has Fallen*. And a very clear set of images were rolling in my head. A woman in love on her way to meet her lover, a jealous ex-husband spying on her, and a Nigerian lover who would eventually be murdered. So, a film about death. And the central question of the film would be: When Africans die in Europe, where do their spirits wander? Which spaces do they haunt?

As we listen to the voice-over, we are introduced to the three main characters, Anna, Bruce, and Simon, each shown in a separate shot. Although Simon is the film's ghost, Bruce is the one whose face we do not see yet, as he appears on his motorcycle, fully covered with a helmet and motorcycle gear. His fleeting appearance here is a brief shot from a subsequent scene that, as we find out later, shows him spying on his ex-wife and Simon's ghost. His body suit and helmet work as a metaphor for a social body—part of British society—trying to insulate and seal itself from any “invasion” from the outside (Higgins 2019, 34). We then cut to another shot, which shows Simon in a train riding through London, sitting in a seat facing backward, while the narrator recites a poem by Birago Diop about spirits.⁸ The poem's theme suggests that Simon is already a ghost in this scene, even though we do not know that yet with certainty. Simon rides the train in “a seat that propels him backward,” evoking, as Higgins aptly notes, Benjamin's “angel of history.” Both Benjamin's angel and the figure of the ghost upset the linear time of progress and European modernity (Brown 2001, 144), as does the film's convoluted temporality. If the train journey is a familiar cinematic trope, with “the changing landscape framed by the window” functioning as “a reminder of the unraveling images of a film-strip” (Beugnet 2016, 70), Simon's shot in the train can be seen as a *mise-en-abyme* that anticipates the film's contrapuntal gestures: London (and, by extension, Europe) read “backward,” “against the grain” of progress, through the defamiliarizing gaze of its former colonized subjects and ghostly others; social reality read through fiction and vice versa.

We then cut to the film's title. In the following sequence, we meet our ghost: we see Simon returning to London, entering a room that triggers a flashback from an erotic encounter with Anna, and then taking a shower. We do not know for sure (yet) that he is a ghost, as Simon's physical appearance remains unchanged, regardless of whether we see him alive or

⁸ The poem's title is “Souffles”—meaning “Spirits” or “Breaths”—and was translated into English by Ruhorahoza for this film (Higgins 2019, 32).

as a ghost that returns. This uncertainty highlights the fact that Simon, whether dead or alive, has always been a ghostly entity in London. The film does not draw a clear distinction between a “dead” and a “living” ghost; the main question it poses—to quote Esther Peeren—is what it means “to live as a ghost, especially when this spectral metaphor designates a state of dispossession” (2014, 4).

The figure of the ghost and the vocabulary of haunting accompanies not only the scenes from *A Tree Has Fallen* but also the quasi-ethnographic parts that show scenes from public places in contemporary London. The first shots of Simon are succeeded by shots from quiet streets and a park, while the narrator introduces the ghost as a conceptual metaphor,⁹ following Avery Gordon. Ghosts, we hear in the voice-over, “have a real presence” and are “attached to the events, things, and places that produce them” (Gordon 1997, xvi, xix; qtd. in Ruhorahoza 2019); they “need not be spirits” (i.e., without a body) but can be people “living in the margins, under the radar;” “former legal or former regular citizens effectively rendered invisible by human policies” (Ruhorahoza 2019). The policies the narrator evokes are the UK’s “politics of austerity” and its “Hostile Environment Policy,” which he describes as “a set of administrative and legislative measures designed to make staying in the country as difficult as possible in the hope that immigrants may leave on their own.” The latter is a policy, he says, that “might have pushed over one million people in clandestinity.” The camera then turns to one such individual, a homeless woman in a park, as the narrator comments:

These streets and this park are haunted by, among others, this woman, who claims that nobody knows her name nor her whereabouts. She could traverse the rest of her existence in this city as a ghost. Here is however videographic evidence of her non-presence and her non-belonging.

The filmmaker’s claim that he has captured “videographic evidence” of this ghost subtly ironizes the language of ethnographic documentaries and their overreliance on positivist knowledge and empirical evidence as a means of capturing “the truth” or “reality” as such. How do you capture a ghost, and if you do, what do you do with this “videographic evidence”?

⁹Since the early 1990s, ghosts and specters entered our theoretical vocabularies as conceptual metaphors and analytical instruments in the humanities and social sciences (Peeren 2014, 9–10). Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* (1994) and Gordon’s *Ghostly Matters* (1997) played a pivotal role in this so-called spectral turn.

Without the mediation of fictionality, which, according to Gordon, “open[s] the door to understanding haunting” (1997, 27), the empirical evidence of a homeless woman does not just speak by itself: this evidence does not automatically illuminate the contradictions at the heart of this democratic European society and former colonial power, nor the ways ghosts haunt this metropolitan city. The narrator’s commentary also winks at the popular practice of spirit photography in the context of nineteenth-century spiritualism and occultism that sought to photographically capture ghosts (Coates 1973). To bring such invisible people into the field of visibility and to be attentive to the ways they haunt, showing them on camera as objects of the viewers’ gaze or casting them as victims of the system is not enough. Speaking back to the dominant victim-trope in the representation of migrants, refugees, and ethnic or racial others in Europe—a trope that entails diminished agency and deprives people of their individuality (Celik 2015, 127–143; New Keywords Collective 2016, 26)—the narrator stresses that “those clandestine people” have their own desires, projects, dreams, preferences; they are “individuated characters who prefer rock music over classical, cinema over theatre, daffodils over lilies” (Ruhorahoza 2019). The ghost is vulnerable but does not necessarily lack agency and is not simply a passive victim. It can assume another form of agency, decoupled from sovereign control and autonomous subjectivity that demands full presence; an agency that is “neither active nor passive” (Derrida 1994, 172) and is different from “acting out” but can “still ha[ve] a profound impact” (Peeren 2014, 20).

The film’s preoccupation with ghosts takes shape against the backdrop of a culture of hypervisibility, which is the ghost’s antipode. Quoting Gordon, the narrator notes that hypervisibility abolishes the distinction between “presence and absence.” Hypervisibility conjures away anything improper or repressed: “No Shadows, no ghosts. In a culture seemingly ruled by technologies of hypervisibility, we are led to believe not only that everything can be seen, but also that everything is available and accessible for our consumption” (Gordon 1997, 16; qtd. in Ruhorahoza 2019). Hence the narrator’s question: “How do [ghosts] survive the paradox of being invisible in the era of hypervisibility?”

As this question is posed, we move to footage from a gay pride parade cross-cut with images of black Africans preaching Christian values in the streets of London. The bodies exposed, displayed, parading, and dancing in public in these scenes are associated with the “culture of hypervisibility” that antagonizes the ghost (Fig. 5.1). However, a contrapuntal reading,



Fig. 5.1 Still from *Europa, "Based on a True Story"* (2019) by Kivu Ruhorahoza. Scene from gay pride in London

prompted by the commentary in the voice-over, defamiliarizes these scenes, in which all is supposedly visible and familiar (to Western European audiences), showing that they are teeming with contradictions. The black Africans in the streets calling people to renounce sin and embrace the Lord during a gay pride parade are “preaching to the descendants of those who brought them Christianity” (Ruhorahoza 2019). The narrator unpacks the irony: “the memory of gods and saints that has been recently forgotten on one side is being kept alive by those who were coerced into forgetting their own divinities.” While they mirror the “civilizing mission” of European colonizers, these present-day black Christian missionaries, who have lost connection to their own divinities, pose as marginalized, eccentric figures on this British stage. As they try to “civilize” and redeem the lost souls of Londoners, the roles between colonizers and colonized seem to be reversed, but the power structures between them are not. A scene of inclusivity and emancipation (gay pride) becomes haunted by the presence of these descendants of the enslaved peoples of Africa, whose emancipation from the specter of colonialism is still an unfinished project in the post-imperial world and whose connection to their ancestral divinities and cultures has been irrevocably severed.

The voice of a street preacher speaking of sin and salvation in the background invests the half-naked, dancing bodies with moral judgment, but this judgment, I argue, concerns primarily the contradictions in the project of European modernity and progress: progress built on barbaric

colonization posing as a civilizing mission. In another ironic reversal, Ruhorahoza's quasi-ethnographic lens casts the extravagantly dressed or exposed bodies of the gay pride parade as performing a strange European dance, reminiscent of the rites of African tribes that ethnographic documentaries by Western filmmakers about "primitive" cultures have so often recorded (and staged). The stories of ("liberal," "emancipated") Europe and Africa become entangled as they resonate through each other. The concurrent presence of the black preachers and the (mainly) white gay bodies mimics and subverts the colonial gaze of Western filmmakers on Africa with its exoticizing, sexualized, voyeuristic undertones, as well as the representation of African cultures as primitive, strange, threatening, inferior (Said 1978). Rather than the measure of Civilization with a capital C, Britishness (and, by extension, Europeanness) is cast as *a culture* among others—a culture with its own weirdness and always already carrying the cultures of others too, either through its public practices and "rituals" or through the ghosts that linger in its spaces.

Said's contrapuntal reading, Pinar Bilgin writes, is "a method for doing research as if viewed through the eyes of 'the exile'" (2017, 5), whose "eccentricity," according to Said, has "the positive benefit of challenging the system" (Said 1993, 333). As an exile of sorts, the filmmaker, an African foreigner in London, casts London as a strange place, marked by paradoxes that the film explores without offering clear-cut conclusions or resolutions (Fig. 5.2). By tapping into the ethnographic grammar of



Fig. 5.2 Still from *Europa, "Based on a True Story"* (2019) by Kivu Ruhorahoza. Scene from a public protest in London

Western filmmakers in order to make a *European* city the object of focalization of an African filmmaker, Ruhorahoza denaturalizes familiar images of London's public spaces by introducing ghosts into this field of (hyper) visibility. Scenes of public events—gay pride parades to anti-Trump, anti-Brexit, and pro-Brexit rallies, protests against the war in Iraq, and the Notting Hill carnival—take center stage throughout the film. These events project conflicting political ideologies and racial tensions in the UK alongside the well-known multicultural image of this metropolitan city, exemplified in the images from the Notting Hill Carnival, which mainly celebrates Caribbean culture. London's public space emerges as a terrain of free democratic expression but also as haunted by the exclusion of spectral others (such as Simon) who cannot appear in public and cannot protest the conditions of their dispossession or join the dancing crowd. The number of those spectral others, as the film suggests, is exponentially growing under the politics of suspicion promulgated by Britain's "Hostile Environment Policy" and right-wing tabloids that confound the lines between migrant, refugee, and asylum seeker.

A frontal shot of a banner that reads "refugees are welcome" during a demonstration is succeeded by the subjective shot of another banner featuring the word "RESIST" but shown from the back view and with the letters upside down (Fig. 5.3). How does resistance look like for those on



Fig. 5.3 Still from *Europa*, “Based on a True Story” (2019) by Kivu Ruhorahoza. “RESIST” banner from public protest in London, shown from the back view

the other side, who cannot march in public? While British citizens are marching *for* refugees, how can refugees or asylum seekers become subjects rather than objects of acts of resistance?

2 FICTION AND THE PERFORMANCE OF TRUTH

As we watch the reverse “RESIST” banner, the narrator ponders the suspicion with which stories of asylum seekers are received both by the authorities and by liberal citizens. He links this suspicion with the way the realities of these people often surpass the limits of *vraisemblance* and are perceived as implausible—*fictional* in the sense of *fake*. The stories of their persecution are often “so horrific” and “tales of their flight to Europe so formidable” that their traumatizing experiences are deemed “exaggerated” or untruthful. So, as marching British citizens issue a call to “resist” white nationalism, the narrator wonders what this speech act actually means to ghostly people and whether “resistance” for them might involve a reverse passage from their “fictional” realities to normalcy:

What does resist mean to those rendered ghostly by an openly hostile immigration policy, those living under the radar? Does resist mean performing normalcy? For Simon, did resist mean acting normal, and did acting normal mean attempting to encroach not only on spaces of legality but also on spaces of privilege such as a theatre or a romantic relationship?

For ghosts like Simon to tell their stories, the fictional needs to be mobilized alongside or through realist modes of representation. We thus cut to one of the film’s most powerful sequences that shows Simon, when he was still alive, appearing for an audition in a dimly lit theater. This is the moment of his first encounter with Anna, his future lover, as well as her husband Bruce, who is directing the play Simon is auditioning for. Only the three of them are present: Simon stands on the stage while Bruce and Anna are sitting in the front seats. Not having prepared anything for the audition, Simon proposes to perform a scene that takes place in an “immigration appeal court,” where his character “is making his final plea” for his asylum case after all his previous appeals have been rejected (Fig. 5.4).

Simon, as the viewer realizes, is performing his own story as an actor, re-enacting his previous performances in court—the “theatre of justice”



Fig. 5.4 Still from *Europa, “Based on a True Story”* (2019) by Kivu Ruhorahoza. Simon’s audition for Bruce

that has heard his story time and again over the course of 10 years, only to reject it as improbable and untruthful. Looking at Bruce and Anna, Simon addresses the judge:

Your honor ... The Home Office have challenged my asylum claim. They have rejected all my appeals. They’ve expressed significant doubts about my story. Even my name, I have been told, is possibly not mine. But, your honour, I am who I’ve always claimed to be.

Simon recounts the story of him being shot during the “Miss World riots” in Nigeria in November 2002, which claimed the lives of over 200 people.¹⁰ While he shares the horrific details of his shooting, he shows the scars on his torso caused by the bullets and describes the damage they did. Given that his actual plea failed to convince the court, and the physical traces of his story on his body were not accepted as empirical proof of his story’s truth, how does the re-enacting of this story as a fictional, theatrical monologue function in the film?

The distinction between fact and fiction does not correspond to that between truth and falsehood, Kendall Walton argues, as “Fact can be

¹⁰The riots were triggered by the plan to hold the Miss World Pageant in Abuja. As a result, the Pageant was eventually relocated to London that year.

fiction and fiction fact” (1990, 74). This means that one “can treat a fact fictionally, incorporating it into a game of make-believe with the consequence that a fictional narrative can be composed entirely of empirical truths” (Eagleton 2012, 118). But as a fact or true story enters the realm of fiction, it is subjected to a different set of rules and criteria that determine its “felicity” as a speech act.¹¹ If a speech before a judge is just as much a performance as an actor’s monologue, the former is a speech act masquerading as a constative, as it is judged for its truth or falsity, while the latter is understood as a performative event that “produces the very objects to which it appears to refer” (Eagleton 2012, 137).

Contrary to the legal principle that one is “innocent until proven guilty,” the asylum seeker’s narrative is often deemed false until proven true. Especially in the hostile climate forged in Europe since the so-called refugee crisis in 2015, in which Ruhorahoza’s film intervenes, migrants and refugees are “figured as always-already ‘suspect’—potential ‘terrorists’ who have infiltrated Europe,” as “candidates for the dubious status of ‘bogus refugees’” or “potential ‘secret agents’” (New Keywords Collective 2016, 6). When Simon play-acts who he actually is, he is (probably) reciting the same story he has told the court time and again. Here, however, the court’s logic of suspicion and the criterion of truth and falsity give way to another principle: the willing suspension of disbelief. The suspension of suspicion or disbelief in fiction allows the audience to identify with Simon and relate to his story without looking for ways to disprove or doubt it. To the extent that his performance is deeply moving—and it is—its perlocutionary force, that is, its power to convince and move others, is intensely felt. Fiction’s suspension of suspicion enables the truth of ghostly others to be heard and others to relate to it empathetically. The “empathetic imagination” (Margulies 1989) that Simon’s narrative triggers is registered in the close-ups of Anna’s face, evidently moved, as she listens to his story.

Simon’s performance follows a scripted narrative. This becomes clear, for example, when during his monologue, just as he is about to say that he came close to dying, he gets stuck and has to repeat his line from the beginning. Yet, his story’s scripted character does not diminish its

¹¹ I follow the terminology of J.L. Austin’s speech act theory (1975 [1962]), according to which constative statements can be true or false while speech acts can be “felicitous” or “infelicitous.” Eventually, Austin ended up treating constative statements as (implicit) performatives too in his general theory of language as performative.

authenticity in the viewer's experience. In fact, the traces of its citational, iterable character on the stage allude to the several past repetitions of his story in his many failed appeals, thereby also establishing the affinity of the two "theatres," despite their different conventions and rules of operation.¹² The same story that is rejected in court as untrue finds a place in fiction as a felicitous performance of truth. If the fact-based discourse of the immigration appeal court must "continually police and expel its margin" (Gordon 1997, 26), i.e., the fictional, in order to detect "bogus" asylum claims, in this sequence the fictional comes to haunt legal discourse, underscoring its inadequacy to determine the *truth* through a disavowal of the fictional, the ghostly, and anything that cannot be articulated through its grammar.

The sequence epitomizes fictionality's role in *Europa* as a whole, accentuating its weird realism. The fictional emerges not as an autonomous realm, devoid of rules or separated from social reality. The scars on Simon's body entangle his theatrical performance with the truth of the (suffering) body: empirical, physical evidence, however, need this fictional setting to "tell" their truth, alongside Simon's verbal account. The fictive is not the opposite of fact but what falls through the cracks of positivist knowledge regimes and attempts to document facts—including those of immigration policies to distinguish "real" from "fake" refugee claims. The fictional becomes a dense site that allows ghostly people to temporarily appear and give an account of themselves by telling their truth in a way that can be intelligible. The "grammar" of fiction provides a different matrix of intelligibility from that of the "serious" discourses that produce social reality. Fiction in *Europa*'s weird realism is immersed in social reality but is not

¹² Citationality was a reason for J.L. Austin to reject fictional speech acts as non-serious, parasitic: "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" (1975, 22). Countering Austin's banishment of fiction from his theory as abnormal and anomalous, Derrida famously argued that such "abnormal" uses of language showcase iterability and citationality as a general law of language (Derrida 1982; Culler 2000, 509). Citationality for Derrida showcases the structural dependence of "serious" speech acts on fictional, "nonserious" ones (Derrida 1982; Culler 2000, 509). For a "serious" speech act to be felicitous "it must be recognizable as the repetition of a conventional procedure, and the actor's performance on the stage is an excellent model of such repetition" (Derrida presented in Culler 1983, 119). Thus "the possibility of 'serious' performatives depends upon the possibility of performances" in which this iterability is pronounced (1983, 119).

answerable to positivist laws. It can accommodate the paradoxes ghosts embody—presence and absence, death and life, being and non-being—and haunt any attempt to document social reality as it is (e.g., in the documentary parts) by pointing to its constitutive exclusions: the other side of the “resist” banner. Those ghostly others who, to use the narrator’s words, are banned from “spaces of legality” can only “encroach” on spaces of “legality” or “privilege” through fiction’s grammar: by “performing normalcy” and performing their truth as/in fiction.

Rejecting any absolute distinction between fiction and fact, Gordon aptly understands the fictive as a “complication”: “the ensemble of cultural imaginings, affective experiences, animated objects, marginal voices, narrative densities, and eccentric traces of power’s presence” (1997, 25). To put it somewhat differently, in *Europa*, the fictional prompts the contrapuntal reading of social reality as it appears in the documentary parts: a reading that points to the “eccentric traces” of power, the contradictions, the constitutive absences and “marginal voices” even in the most hypervisible sites of London’s public space.

3 “I CAME TO TELL YOU THAT YOU DON’T MAKE SENSE ANYMORE”: GHOSTS AND POWER

Simon may get to tell his story on the theatrical stage, but Bruce remains the play’s director. He gets to decide if Simon’s audition was successful and if he will get the part. We never hear about the audition’s outcome, yet Bruce does get to act as Simon’s judge eventually, as he is the one who determines his fate. Bruce, whose hostility and hatred toward migrants escalates in the course of the plot, and who is unable to process Anna’s affair with Simon, decides to get Simon deported by making a call to the immigration police. This call, as we find out toward the end, leads to Simon’s death—not by murder, as the narrator had initially suggested, but by suicide. After Simon returns as a ghost, Bruce also ends up shooting him when he finds him in bed with Anna (by then, his ex-wife). Upon shooting Simon, Bruce commits suicide. Bruce’s shooting of Simon is a final, desperate attempt to exercise his power by conjuring away the ghost of a man he has already indirectly killed. But even though the blood flowing from Simon’s head in Anna’s terrified arms looks real, one cannot really kill a ghost. Conjuring or exorcizing a ghost is an attempt to master its workings and, thus, to also control the present and the future. But, as

Wendy Brown reminds us, “conjugation is never only or fully in our hands” (2001, 151). A ghost has its own agency and can return even after one conjures it away.

Bruce’s escalating aggression toward foreigners who he feels are encroaching on his space allegorizes Britain’s anxiety over its loss of imperial power (which largely motivated the Brexit campaign) as well as the “fantasy” “of white loss of privilege” (Reddy 1998, 55). Simon’s “stealing” of Anna exacerbates Bruce’s sense of loss of power. Simon’s suicide after Bruce’s call to the immigration authorities is concurrently proof of Bruce’s power *and* a blow to this power. As the narrator puts it, reconstructing Bruce’s perspective: “By killing himself, Simon had deprived Bruce of an ancient male urge to physically harm those who steal our females ... especially when those men who steal our females are thought to be inferior to us.”

The power play between Bruce and the ghost climaxes in a scene in which the ghost-Simon visits Bruce at his home. The dialogue is worth quoting in its entirety:

B: What do you want from me?

S: Nothing. Really. Nothing.

B: You’ve got some nerve showing up like that.

S: Why so much anger?

B: What the fuck are you talking about?

S: You know what I’m talking about.

B: No, I don’t.

S: You haven’t lost anything Bruce. You are still the powerful one. And that is how it’s going to be for a very long long time. All of this is yours. You are, still, the mighty one.

B: Is that what you’ve come to tell me?

S: No. *I came to tell you that you don’t make sense anymore.* Do you understand me, Bruce? Nobody is out to get you, or take anything from you. Nobody. We all just try to survive in a world that you have created for us. You are still the master of all of us. The master of dreams, beliefs, and narratives. If you think about it, that is all that counts, right? Dreams, beliefs and narratives. But enough of that. I have come to forgive you.

B: Forgive me for what?

S: Do I have to say it? I have come to forgive you for being a patriot. For reporting an immigration crime anonymously.

B: Get out of my house. Get out! Get the fuck out!

While ghosts often return to avenge their own death or another unsettled injustice, Simon's visit to Bruce is motivated by the intention to forgive his aggressor for "being a patriot," as Simon ironically puts it. Paradoxically, however, as Simon affirms Bruce's continuing power over him—the empire's persisting power over formerly colonized subjects still entangled in conditions of dependency on their former masters—he also deprives Bruce of the legitimacy in which his power is grounded. Unpacking the mechanisms of what she calls "imperial paranoia," Anne McClintock notes that the legitimacy of an empire rests on the construction of external enemies that induce "nightmares of impending attack" and make aggressive measures appear justified (2009, 92). As Simon removes the grounds of Bruce's paranoia and fear—"Nobody is out to get you, or take anything from you"—he de-legitimizes Bruce's aggression. The ghost wants nothing from him. Simon's statement that Bruce "*does not make sense anymore*" seals Bruce's aggression as illegitimate. It casts it as the "crime" of a paranoid in power rather than a justified "patriotic" act. Bruce may still be in power, as the ghost affirms, but it is a "senseless" power.

The loss of ground Bruce experiences due to the ghost's calling unhinges him. In the next scene, after Simon leaves, we see Bruce in the basement, evidently distressed, initiating a weird dance through which he physically enacts this unhinging through uncoordinated, uncontrolled, violent movements (Fig. 5.5): the dance of a deranged man that, indeed,



Fig. 5.5 Still from *Europa, "Based on a True Story"* (2019) by Kivu Ruhorahoza. Bruce's weird dance

“does not make sense.” Exhausted from his dance, Bruce kneels down as a swarm of dark matter comes out of his mouth in the film’s only magic realist moment (a manifestation of his guilt? His power leaving his body? An internal demon he tries to exorcise?). The ghost may partly belong to the fictional, but here it is an agent that exposes the senselessness and strangeness of Bruce’s construction of reality.

Bruce’s weird dance is sharply contrasted with two other dances by Simon and Anna in earlier scenes. Simon’s dance at the nightclub where he works as a go-go dancer when still alive is an erotic dance that exposes his sexualized black body, offered to the hungry gazes of British women as an exotic product for consumption. It is a dance that—controlled as it may be—enacts Simon’s dispossession and powerlessness: while he is dancing to survive as an illegal migrant in London, with his nearly naked body only “bound” by shiny ribbons reminiscent of a slave’s chains, his family in Nigeria is being massacred without him being able to do anything about it. Anna’s dance takes place at an art gallery, as Simon-the-ghost is watching her: spinning in repetitive circles, hers is a dance that follows the meditative practice of the Sufi whirling dervishes, seeking perhaps a mode of being beyond the diptych of power and impotence through a dance that requires both control of one’s body and a form of surrendering and letting go. With Simon’s ghost gone and Bruce dead, Anna is the only character left in London by the end of the film. The final shot from *A Tree Has Fallen* shows Anna with London in the background (Fig. 5.6), suggesting



Fig. 5.6 Still from *Europa, “Based on a True Story”* (2019) by Kivu Ruhorahoza. Anna with London in the background

the possibility of an alternative mode of being—a feminine resistance to patriarchy, focused on healing and “learning to be vulnerable in a productive way.”¹³

“[A] contrapuntal perspective is required,” Said writes, in order to “think through and interpret together experiences that are discrepant, each with its particular agenda and pace of development, its own internal formations, its internal coherence and system of external relationships, all of them coexisting and interacting with others” (1993, 32). The intertwined fates but also the discrepant experiences of the three protagonists, captured by their dances, are part of *Europa*’s contrapuntal exploration of disparate histories in present-day London and its people. As a result, the world of publicness emerges as tied to the parallel world of ghostly subjects banished from public space; those whose voice or presence gets drowned in the noise of the rallies, and whose resistance cannot take the form of a public demonstration. Simon’s ghost also interferes in the documentary parts, prompting a contrapuntal reading of the rallies and public events through those absent from those spaces, whose voice is here asserted through the fictional.

The film’s last sequence shows the filmmaker just about to leave London, feeling he has become “one of the unwanted” and “utterly powerless in front of hostile immigration policies,” as he confesses. From the sounds of London he is taking with him, he leaves us at the film’s very end with the one sound that, as he says, will continue to haunt him: an African man having a breakdown during his weekly report at the home office, after being “stuck in immigration limbo” for 14 years, unable to work or have a dignified life. The film ends with the sound recording of this immigrant’s breakdown against a black screen. This man is distressingly present through his voice and yet invisible to the viewer. His invisibility grants his voice the haunting power that the film wants the viewer, too, to experience. The black screen and his voice—contrasted with the footage from public events where all seems visible in a democratic space of expression—is the film’s final contrapuntal gesture: it makes the “normalcy” of living, working, protesting, or celebrating in the streets, less transparent, less self-evident, and more *hypervisible*, through the structural absence of those who are denied this normalcy.

¹³This suggestion is also advanced by the filmmaker’s commentary in the voice-over, who shares the insights of his friend, Suzy, on feminine resistance.

4 GHOSTS IN PROTEST EVENTS

One of the premises of Ruhorahoza's film is the impossibility of clandestine people asserting their presence in public spaces, let alone protesting the conditions of their dispossession. Responding to this impossibility, the film allows the fictional to interfere with social reality both in the documentary and the fiction parts; it invites a ghost to haunt documentary footage of public demonstrations and celebrations. This ghostly interference sets off a contrapuntal reading of London and its public spaces, revealing the conflicting histories and absences in London's streets.

Another response to the question the film poses—"what does resist mean to those rendered ghostly ...?"—has been articulated in recent years through public demonstrations that mobilize the ghostly and the fictional to stage precisely the banishing of (certain) bodies from public space or the impossibility for certain people to protest in public.¹⁴ On April 10, 2015, the first "ghost march" in history took place in front of the Spanish Parliament in Madrid. Instead of actual people, the protest was held by holographic projections of protesters. This hologram protest was organized by the platform *No Somos Delito* (We Are Not Crime)¹⁵ as a critical response to a new law introduced by the ruling party in Spain in March 2015, the "Law of Citizen Security" (or pejoratively, "Gag Law"). This law sought to restrict dissent in public spaces by illegalizing assemblies and demonstrations in front of government buildings without permission from the authorities. It also prohibited recordings of police responses to protests. Spain's hologram protest had other "followers" worldwide. One of them was a "ghost rally" in Seoul on February 24, 2016, organized by Amnesty International Korea, in order to oppose the South Korean administration's "crackdown on free speech" and its banning of public protests in central Seoul (Kang 2016). A third hologram protest was held in Toronto on November 17, 2017, organized by Greenpeace Canada outside the

¹⁴For an extensive discussion of the hologram protest in Madrid and its "followers," see Boletsi (2018). This section on the hologram protests summarizes some of the arguments developed in Boletsi (2018). On the uses of fictional modalities in recent protest events, see also Boletsi (2024).

¹⁵The platform consisted of numerous associations, migrant rights groups, environmental and human rights organizations, and groups linked with the Indignados Movement in Spain. The protest was filmed in a town near Madrid and the protesters were then projected as holograms in front of the Parliament (Boletsi 2018, 17; Lopez 2016; Flesher Fominaya and Teti 2015).

headquarters of TD Bank. During this protest, members of the indigenous Kwantlen community spoke as holograms to protest the bank's financing of Kinder Morgan's Trans Mountain Pipeline expansion (Gathercole 2017). Another recent figuration of holograms in protest was the use of holographic projections of animals by a German circus in 2019 to protest animal abuse ("German Circus" 2019).

Besides protesting holograms, other recent protest events also tapped into the defamiliarizing grammar of ghostliness by drawing attention to indexical traces of absent bodies in public space. On November 29, 2015, an empty-shoes protest was held in downtown Paris as a response to the cancellation of a planned climate rally by environmental activists before climate change talks. The rally was canceled by the authorities as part of emergency measures and security concerns after the terrorist attacks in Paris earlier that month (Zorthian 2015; Specia 2015). Four years later, on November 25, 2019, massive demonstrations were held across the globe on the occasion of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. One of those took place in Brussels, where red-painted shoes were placed on the ground, evoking the ghostly presence of victims of femicide ("She Leaves Him" 2019). And the so-called "nanodemonstrations," which started in the town of Apatity and spread in several cities in Russia in 2011–2012, used miniature toys instead of humans, placing them in squares and public sites as a response to the heightened state repression of protest and increased risks of physical protest in the country (Baker 2016, 4–5; Karmodi 2012).

Despite the differing motivations and contexts of these events, what they share is the mobilization of fiction and ghostliness as means of defamiliarization aimed at articulating a different kind of agency in the political: an agency that does not demand full presence but claims presence through absence, and political valence through the assumed "non-seriousness" and playfulness of the fictional. These events, as I argued elsewhere, mobilized the spectral and the fictional—commonly perceived as politically harmless by the authorities—as a means of bypassing official restrictions to the use of public space for political dissent (Boletsi 2018, 21–23). The hologram protest in Madrid, for example, was allowed to take place only under the guise of fiction, that is, because NSD announced it as a "film shoot," hence, "a *representation* of a protest, framed as film, art, fiction" (Boletsi 2018, 20). As a spokesperson for NSD said, "[w]e were only able to do it because we got a film shoot permit. ... A protest permit would not have worked" (Flesher Fominaya and Teti 2015). A

similar ruse proved necessary in the Seoul hologram protest. When the request by Amnesty International Korea to hold a live demonstration was rejected by the Seoul Metropolitan Police, the organizers “tweaked their event and reported it as a ‘cultural activity’” (Starrs 2016). 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 2016; Boletsi 2018, 20). The organizers thus tricked the authorities by framing the rally as a cultural event, thereby supposedly detaching it from the “serious” sphere of politics and revamping it as fiction or entertainment. By fictionalizing the bodies of protesters as toys in order to draw attention to their absence, the Russian nanodemonstrations also confused the authorities by toying with the limits of legality: the police had to seek advice from the prosecutor’s office on whether protests with non-human participants qualified as “public events” and thus required authorization by the authorities.¹⁶ The weird, ghostly “grammars” of these events twisted normative understandings of social realities and public space.¹⁷

From the perspective of the authorities, the frame of “fiction” or “cultural event” was thought to blunt the political edge of these events, making them less threatening to power and thus permissible. Nevertheless, the organizers used this preconception in order to confound state discourse, circumvent its prohibitions, and expose its inability to contain and “continually police and expel its margin—the margin of error—which is the fictive” (Gordon 1997, 26). Distinguished from the “serious” realm of politics and social reality, fiction can be deemed irrelevant and trivial but also potentially critical and subversive. In these protests, these antagonistic forces—triviality versus critical potential—turned into *synergetic* forces that enhanced the protests’ political thrust. Despite attempts to neutralize the political content of these protests by relegating them to the “trivialized space” of culture, toys, or fiction, fiction came back with a vengeance

¹⁶Parodying this process, the organizers of the third nanodemonstration filled an application for a demonstration “to be attended by ‘toys from Kinder Surprise (one hundred pieces), Lego figurines (one hundred pieces), toy soldiers (twenty pieces), soft toys (fifteen pieces), miniature cars (ten pieces)’” (Baker 2016, 5).

¹⁷I take my cue here from recent recastings of the “weird” as a critical concept in cultural, literary and ecocritical theory (e.g., Morton 2016; Luckhurst 2017). In Boletsi (2024), I develop the notion of “weird aesthetics” as a lens in order to approach these and other recent events of protest and activism in public space.

to defamiliarize hegemonic political discourse and expose its repressive logic.¹⁸

5 CONCLUSION

The new, shifting relation between fact and fiction in the era of post-truth calls for creative responses to conditions of enforced dispossession and social exclusion that force more and more people into a ghostly existence or restrict people's access to public spaces and their right to voice dissent. Critical responses to a political landscape shaped by neoliberal governmentality and post-truth populism need to go beyond fact-checking (Keane 2018) or insisting on the "facts" behind the "fiction." In the realm of film and art, this requires a search for grammars beyond realist and documentary modes that often rely on the "victim trope" (Celik 2015) in their representation of migrants and ethnic others in European societies. The grammar of fiction could help articulate such alternative responses, as it does in Ruhorahoza's film and in the public protests discussed in this chapter. This requires an approach to fiction not as an isolated realm or an escape from reality but as a force that operates contrapuntally with social reality, through its interdependence with, but also difference from, dominant regimes of visibility and representation. The grammar of fiction—which is intertwined with the grammar of ghostliness—can tease out the strangeness and incongruities of normalized public spaces and practices, fostering spaces in which the voices of those absent, excluded, or hidden in plain sight temporarily resonate.

As Gordon writes, "to see the things and the people who are primarily unseen and banished to the periphery of our social graciousness ... it is essential to imagine their life worlds because you have no other choice but to make things up in the interstices of the factual and the fabulous, the place where the shadow and the act converge" (1997, 196–197). Ruhorahoza's film and the protest events discussed in the previous section mobilize the fictional, albeit differently, to respond to the conundrum of how people who are not even recognized as subjects or cannot protest in public can resist their enforced dispossession without resorting to the

¹⁸For this argument, see Boletsi (2018, 21–23). I am taking my cue here from Jacques Derrida's discussion of literature's freedom as 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" (1992, 38).

grammar of autonomous subjectivity and presence. The grammars of fictionality and ghostliness provide a means of projecting the kind of dispossession exemplified by the ghost—an ontologically unstable figure that can say “I am” and “I am not” at the same time (Boletsi 2013, 194)—as a mode of (non)being that could potentially yield alternative forms of agency in the social world.¹⁹

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¹⁹This is not the agency of the liberal intentional subject that presupposes presence and autonomy, but, following Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou, a form of agency premised on *dispossession* as an existential condition of not “owning” oneself, as the self is formed or undone by and through others (Butler and Athanasiou 2013, 3). Butler and Athanasiou distinguish two understandings of *dispossession*: as a category that underscores the self’s relational constitution and as “a condition of induced inequality and destitution” in the framework of neoliberal capitalism that produces marginalized people or spectral bodies not recognized as citizens, such as illegal migrants (19, 20).

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