

# A Ghostly Encounter and the Questions We Might Learn from It

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# **A ghostly encounter**

## **- and the questions we might learn from it<sup>1</sup>**

### **Abstract**

This paper takes a point of departure in a ghost story. Two social workers working in a community house in Copenhagen have both encountered a ghost. A first part of the paper wonders about the kinds of questions that are tempting to ask when listening to a ghost story as well as about how more careful questioning may allow organization studies to learn from ghostly encounters. Listening to what the two social workers have experienced, the paper identifies four sets of questions that the ghostly encounter may offer to organization studies, namely questions about inheritance, what it means to feel at home in an organization, temporality and affect. Thereafter, the paper discusses how organizational inquiries that are attentive to ghostly matters may look like.

**Keywords:** Ghost, affect, temporality, uncanny, ghostly encounter, inheritance

### **Introduction**

Some years ago, a friend of mine told me about a ghost in a community house not far from where I live. Believing myself to be an open-minded scholar and because I was increasingly becoming interested in organizational ghosts, I immediately grabbed a microphone and sat up two interviews with social workers working in the house. One of the interviews went well. The other one didn't really happen, because the person did not feel comfortable talking about something as strange as ghosts, but I talked to her on the phone instead. And, indeed, the two social workers had encountered a ghost. I transcribed the interviews with good scholarly carefulness, but then .... nothing happened. I could not really interact with the empirical material in front of me. What sort of organizational questions could the ghost speak to? What sort of research questions from our field of organisation studies could do justice to the strange experience of encountering a ghost while at work in a public organization? A main challenge was whether to approach the ghost as some sort of metaphor, a stand in for something else, or whether I could somehow move beyond a metaphorical reading. The transcriptions and many pages of notes were finally hidden away somewhere in the bottom of a drawer and did not re-surface for at least two years. When the stack of paper did return to my desk, it was because I was becoming curious not about what questions the ghost story might answer, but what

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<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank Carolyn Hunter and Lynne Baxter for their subtle, yet caring and courageous manner of making this paper happen. I also want to thank Tim Edensor for the wise guidance he gave me on how to write about ghosts while walking around a cemetery in Copenhagen in pouring rain in the spring of 2016.

questions it might open up for. By approaching the ghost story as a place for identifying and developing questions rather than a place of potential answers or evidence, I was finally able to begin to think and write with the material. Thus, this paper begins with this question: What questions can a ghost story make possible? More specifically, what questions can the particular ghost story I am about to tell offer to organisation studies?

Recently, organizational scholars have become interested in ghosts and hauntings. A small but increasing number of contributions have brought attention to the uncanny or even ghostly qualities inherent to organization and management (Vaaben & Bjerg, 2019; Christensen & Muhr, 2019; Beyes & Steyaert, 2013; Pors, Olaison and Otto, 2019; Matte and Bencherki, 2019; Gabriel, 2012; De Cock, O'Doherty & Rehn, 2013; Muhr & Azad, 2013). Particularly Orr's (2014) study of how local government chief executives encounter and live with ghosts has demonstrated, not only that we find ghostly presences in mundane organizational settings, but also that analytical curiosity about ghostly workings can enrich our understanding of organizational change and transformation of organizational traditions. In this paper, I draw on this rich body of work that aims to develop our understanding of organisations and organisational life by not ignoring or omitting but attending to and analytically caring for the weird or mysterious experiences one might have or get access to in studying organisations.

Although, this could also be interesting and valuable, I will not develop a fully-fledged theory of organisational ghosts. My more modest approach is to stay with questions and let questions cascade into new questions. Gerhard Richter (2016, 18) has described Walter Benjamin's style of reading (particularly of Kafka) as a process of 'allowing oneself to be led ever more deeply into a problem rather than wishing to be guided out of it.' This inspires a manner of approaching a given material that seeks to keep questions open and alive rather than settling for certain answers (Karlsen 2018). I try to enact such a practice in my engagement with the ghost story. I approach it with a care for questions, that is, an ambition to not explain away what seems mysterious or weird but use questions to make that what is questioned even stranger. Thus, the ghost story will not provide me with answers but questions with which to return to discussions in organisation studies with more questions, with awe and wondering. In what follows, first, I will tell the ghost story as it was told to me by the two social workers and consider how certain questions and forms of questioning may hinder and block a fruitful relationship between scholars of organisation and ghost stories. Then, I will approach the ghost story with an interest in the questions of relevance to organisation study that the ghost story might host.

### **Meeting the ghost**

The first time, Sandra, a skilled and experienced social worker at a local community house, encounters the ghost, it is in the form of the sound of footsteps. The house is a local center for social work – it also hosts music concerts, cultural events, tango-lessons, communal dinners

etc. in one of the most diverse areas of Copenhagen. Particularly, it is known for the ability of the social workers that work there to successfully relate to some of the vulnerable children and young people in the neighborhood. The house, I should add, lies in Chapel Road. Sandra finds herself in a large room, often used for community dinners. She is quite detailed in her description of the house: 'There are so many doors, swing doors, and many entrances to this room, so many stairs, corners and corridors, and so many toilets.' She remembers the encounter in the following way:

I know this house so well. I know all of its sounds. I can recognize exactly which door opens by the different sounds. But then that evening I hear something a bit strange. A door, but then also footsteps, very quickly. Out of some glass window in a wall, I see a figure run from the bathroom and up some stairs into an office area. I notice that this person is really capable of moving fast, then I go towards the office, but the door is locked. I unlock it and search the room, but no one is there.

The second time Sandra encounters the ghost, it is observing her through a window as Sandra is working in the kitchen. The third encounter allows Sandra to get a slightly better look at the ghost. Again, she is in the kitchen, the door is open to the large room and through it, Sandra sees a silhouette with long skinny limbs, pointy elbows, dark hair and white clothes. Again, the ghost is observing Sandra, but then from one moment to the next she is gone.

Sandra's colleague Eve has also heard and felt the presence of the ghost, but not seen her. A couple of times, the ghost has given Eve a shock by all of a sudden jumping up and down right next to her so that she can feel the old floor moving. Eve does not like the presence of the ghost and she has a distinct feeling of anxiety whenever she senses the ghost lady: 'Well, it is as if she is always very stressed or something. At least that is what it feels like.' She has experienced a couple of times that the ghost throws kitchen equipment, bowls, pots, large spoons and the like, around in the kitchen.

Eve has spent quite a lot of time worrying that she is going crazy, but it is somehow comforting that a third colleague, Hassan, has also seen the ghost. It is not easy for Eve to talk about the ghost. At first, she did not want to be interviewed by me. She said that it felt like it had gotten worse just because Sandra had been talking to me. She then agreed to meet with me but cancelled our first appointment. For our second appointment, I cannot find her, and I call her up. She tells me that she does not want to meet for an interview, but that we can talk for a little while on the phone. She hates to be in the house when the ghost is there: 'Sometimes', she says 'I have had to drink half a bottle of white wine. Things like this. Because I needed to calm my nerves. I could not, the thing was so forceful, or how can I put it. There was so much activity.'

With ghost stories like this one, it is very tempting to jump directly to the straightforward ontological question: Is it true? Does the ghost exist? This temptation to look

for simple answers, it seems to me, is sometimes also found in how scholars of organization and management relate to other organizational stories: Is this system efficient? Is this product competitive? Does stakeholder management increase legitimacy? As you will perhaps agree with me, however, such questions lead to rather limited answers. Yes, no, perhaps. By insisting that there is a simple answer to such questions, could it be that we shut down possibilities of other interesting questions and insights? With this manner of questioning, do we not miss opportunities to question and problematize the categories taken for granted in the questions?

It is also quite tempting to explain the ghost away by asking questions like: Has Eve lost her mind? Is the ghost an individual psychological reaction to something? Is she, perhaps, re-living some past trauma? Does she need psychological counselling? Psychological questions like these, I will argue, are also a bit disappointing. Not only because they, magically, make the ghost disappear - in a flash, it is gone - but also because they hinder the trans-disciplinary knowledge interest that organization studies can be. Such questions reduce the complexity of the situation to fit within one disciplinary box, namely organizational psychology. They transform the situation into something that does not challenge disciplinary boundaries. Thus, such questions make not only the ghost disappear, but with it also those questions about subjectivity that entail the complex relationships between organization, psychology and politics. Moreover, with the same gesture, such questions turn the ghost into an individual matter. It is the individual and her psychology, personality, problems, dysfunctionalities and history that are installed as answers and explanations. Management studies know such psychological questions: Perhaps this strategy is not working because employees are not ready to change? Maybe employees resist change because they are afraid of the new, because psychologically they cannot cope with transformations? With questions like these, interesting questions about relationships between organizing, change and subjectivity are reduced into a more limited set of questions about the individual and her psychological preferences, inclinations and dysfunctionalities.

A final thing that is also very tempting is to embed the ghost in a coherent and linear narrative. Often ghost stories are told in a rather straightforward narrative. There is a beginning, events building up to a climax, the climax itself and then some form of ending, some form of resolution: The injustice that the ghost was subject to is resolved, and the dead can finally rest. I can give you the narrative that Sandra offers as an ending to her ghost story: One weekend, the house was host to a queer festival. Including dark rooms. In Sandra's formulation: 'People were naked. Every kind of penetration you can think of in every corner of the house.' Apparently, the ghost lady was rather conservative and did not like this event. Or so it seemed, because the next day, Sandra was cooking for a party some 40 kilometers away in the fancy and rich Northern Zealand coastline, and in that kitchen, she again saw the lady. It seems, the queer festival and its dark rooms was too much for an 19<sup>th</sup> century middle-aged lady who thus decided to follow Sandra out of town. Sandra never saw her again. The ghost, it seemed, had chosen to stay in the much posher area of Denmark.

What smooth narratives often do is to provide logical answers: Why is the ghost no longer there? She does not like dark rooms. But, perhaps, too smooth narratives also tame the ghost by imbedding it in linear structures, making its actions logical, reasonable and causal effects – or responses – to certain events. This is, however, not how I shall be thinking about ghostly matters in this paper. What ghosts have to offer, I shall argue, are analytical possibilities of knowing organizations that emerge when we do not think time in a linear fashion. Let us not lock the ghost in a linear narrative and relate to ghosts with a causal logic. Even if the story about a ghost that did not like a queer festival is entertaining...

I have suggested dismissing the empirical question of “does the ghost exist?” Moreover, I have suggested that we do not explain the ghost away with psychological questions and that we do not rationalize the ghost by bringing it into a coherent and linear narrative. The question that will guide the rest of this paper then is: What questions of relevance for organization studies does the ghostly encounters at Chapel Road make possible?

However, before we come to that question, I want to make clear that in working with this ghost story, I am not so interested in the ghost itself, as a sort of coherent figure. Although, I am fascinated with the ghost story, I will be careful not to be too seduced by the well-known and smoothly shaped narrative of a person returning from the past to haunt the present until the injustice he was subject to can be set right and the dead laid to rest. In Fredric Jameson’s (1999, p. 39) words, what the ghostly suggests is not that the ghost exists, but that ‘the living present is scarcely as self-sufficient as it claims to be; that we would do well not to count on its density and solidity.’ It is not the ghost itself that I am interested in, but the ghostly encounter, that is, a dizzying mix of different worlds, temporalities, intensities, histories, politics and the attempts to make sense by those who encounter something unexplainable.

In the following, I first propose that the ghostly encounter opens up questions about inheritance and what it means to inherit in organizations. Second, I discuss questions about who is allowed to feel at home in an organization and the politics inherent to this question. Third, I turn to a set of questions about temporality in organizations. Fourth, I suggest that the ghost story also offers to organization study a set of questions about affect and the capability of bodies to sense and feel something on the boundary for which we have words. Whereas these sections all focus on opening up questions, in the final section, I try to identify more directly what an attention to ghostly matters means for organization study.

### **Inheritance and care**

The first set of questions that the ghost story makes possible, seem to me, to revolve around inheritance and care. Listen to Sandra:

Well, I then think – I know I feel responsible for this house and the work we do in it and so does my colleague and other people with close connections to the house. We are

extremely connected to this house. If she has also had strong connections to the house, then she must also have feelings for it.

Also, Sandra said:

My colleague is convinced that she wants to contact us in some way .... There is no clear message, but there is something. I feel her looking at us. Well, I cannot explain to you what I have felt, but I have felt her looking at us. I have this strong, strong feeling that she is here looking at us.

Someone who cares or has cared as much for the house as Sandra and Eve do is looking at them. The ghost wants something, although there is no message, she wants to contact them, she is looking at them when they do their social work in the house. Thus, the ghostly encounter makes it possible to ask questions about what it means to care for a community house, for a space of social work. It makes it possible to consider what it means to be connected to something, a place or certain profession values. It places Sandra and Eve in a much longer history of generations that have cared for the house, the social work it made possible, and passed it on to the next generation. The ghost makes it possible to wonder about why the ghost is coming back to haunt the house *now*. Is the house at risk? Are new cutbacks underway that will make their work even more difficult? With property values on the rise, will this beautiful old house close to the city centre be sold off to private investors? Have Sandra and Eve forgotten something important? Have some of the ideals with which they started the job faded a bit or even entirely been forgotten? What does it actually mean to inherit a house? What does it mean to inherit the ambitions, values, politics and practices that a house hosts and has hosted in the past (see also Orr 2014)?

One of the central themes in Derrida's *Specters of Marx. The state of Debt the Work of Mourning and the new International* is exactly inheritance and what it means to inherit. To inherit, Derrida argues is to receive an injunction. It is a call. However, an inheritance is never a given, never a clear message. Derrida writes: 'If the readability of a legacy were given, natural, transparent, univocal, if it did not call for and at the same time defy interpretation, we would never have anything to inherit from it.' (Derrida 1994, 16) If the message of the inheritance was clear, we would just be affected by a cause. Thus, if inheritance is an injunction, it is a disjointed injunction. It is an inheritance with many voices. Inheritance is never one with itself, it is always more than one. Derrida again: 'One always inherit from a secret – which says read me, will you ever be able to do so?' (Derrida 1994, 18) The point is that an inheritance is not a specific task nor particular values, but a call to filter, sift, criticize, above all, to think. It is a call to inhabit the contradictions and secrets of the inheritance (Derrida 1994, 18). What we inherit is a call to question, perhaps a call to look for questions, to question what questions are possible in certain places at certain times. Thus, being attentive to the ghostly and to the ghostly moments in organizations is to be attentive to questions, and what questions are

possible. In the following, I will continue to explore what questions our ghost story makes possible.

### **What does it mean to be at home in an organization?**

The ghost story from Chapel Road is also host to a set of questions that revolve around what it means to be at home in a house, at home in an organization, at home in your work. And, also, questions about what happens when you detect the presence of something alien in a homely, well-known space. Remember how the first appearance of the ghost for Sandra was intimately connected to how well she knows the house, its geography of many doors and corridors and its different sounds. In Sandra's story, the first encounter with the ghost unfolded as the sound of footsteps that could not have happened, that should have been impossible, in the specific geography of the house. It is her intimate knowledge of and feeling at home in the house that allow her to sense the ghost.

In Freud's (2003) famous essay on the uncanny, he describes an uncanny atmosphere as composed of strange, intimate relations between something safe and familiar on the one hand and something foreign and disturbing on the other. For Freud, the uncanny is an atmosphere of a particular quality. It is when something, a street, a neighborhood, a conversation that you thought you knew very well all of a sudden, feels strange, foreign, or disturbing. Among other things, Freud's essay consists of a lexicographical exploration tracing the origin and the historical development of the concept of the uncanny. What Freud finds is that although the homely initially meant familiar, friendly and a place free of ghostly influences, over time, it increasingly became ambivalent, until it merged with its antonym, unhomely (Freud 2003, 134). Through this etymological route, the uncanny came to describe the confusing, yet itchy feeling that an encountered foreign world is vaguely familiar: that the foreign has a, however cryptic, route back to the familiar (Freud 2003, 148). The uncanny comes to denote a sneaky feeling that boundaries between familiar and unfamiliar, homely and unhomely are more porous, leaky and precarious than normally assumed.

What I would like to take from this is the idea that ghostly encounters, as uncanny events, have a performative force. They evoke wonderings about how we, and the organizations we work in, judge familiar and foreign. Organizational actors may begin to ask themselves: Why is it that we consider this way of doing things the only natural and necessary way of doing it? Why are these people thought to belong, to be important, while other people are no longer needed, have become disposable? Ghostly encounters are experiences that remind us that our safe dwellings in familiar and homely spaces are rarely unambiguously that. They make us question whether something more is going on, something more is at stake in how organizations order distinctions for us between familiar and foreign, internal and external (Pors 2016a; 2016b). We begin to think about whether the familiar narrative might be an animate force in making counter-narratives appear foreign or even silence them. Perhaps they even make us



consider how we, with our own daily practices, are part of the ongoing work to allow familiar narratives to sustain their hegemony as familiar (see also Orr 2014).

The ghostly encounter in Chapel Road, thus, offers to organization studies the question about what it means to be at home in an organization. And this leads us to questions about what it means to trust and rely on the particular orderings of reality that organizations offer us. As well as questions about all of the possible consequences of one's loyalty to such familiar orderings. What kinds of expectations, duties, loyalties do we accept in order to be allowed to feel at home in certain organizations?

Another related question that seem important to me is how to be part of an organization entails efforts to ignore certain events because they do not fit with the realities that the organization assumes or operates within. The ghost story from Chapel Road could open questions about how organizational actors do work every day to make that, which does not immediately fit customary sense-making fit anyway. For example, Eve tries to explain away her experience like this:

Often, I ignore it. Because these things, they cannot really take place or how can I say it. It cannot just come out of the blue. It is things like this where I think, well it's probably just someone dancing upstairs or something.

Eve's reflection here calls us to consider how much work is being done every day in organizations to not have the normal sense-making collapse. It opens questions about how willing we might be to ignore, how much we invest in taming, those events that could question how organizations order reality for us and thus deem certain things important and of value and other unimportant, useless, out-dated (Otto, Pors and Johnsen 2019).

However, Eve's reflection also makes us notice that even if Eve tries this strategy of either ignoring or squeezing what she experiences into something that fits normal reality, it does not really work. The ghost is a disruption to customary sense-making and our efforts to maintain something as familiar, necessary, uncontested. My point is that a ghostly moment is a moment that holds the capacity to re-politicize something that has been naturalized. It is a moment that seems to urge those who experience it to ask questions about how their organizations make, sometimes violent, distinctions between what kind of values, people and practices that are at home, that can feel safe in the organization and what kind of values, people and practices are labelled as foreign and non-belonging. Thus, I argue, with the ghost story from Chapel Road we, who listen to it, inherit an indeterminate, yet itchy feeling, that something important, something political is at stake in our everyday practices of producing distinctions between familiar and foreign, here and elsewhere or inside and outside.

### **Collapse of linear time**

I hope to have now established that to encounter a ghost is to encounter a call to re-politicize things by bringing back questions that may have been submerged or silenced. I will now

propose that from this we can also learn that time is not linear. If inheritance is always uncertain, unspecified, and if it is more than anything an injunction to think about what it is that you inherit, then a ghostly encounter is a sort of reversal of time: The past has not happened yet. The past is open to change (Blackman 2019, 138). What we inherit is a past that is yet to come. We can phrase it in different ways, but in all cases, a ghostly encounter produces a weird temporality. I would like to emphasize that haunting is not simply, as is sometimes the case in smoother ghost stories, a little folding in an otherwise linear temporality, where a person, an animal or a thing from the past, returns to the present in a disturbing fashion, but where linear time can then be re-established once things have been set right, once the injustice that the ghost was subject to can be undone. My point is that hauntings mess more profoundly with linear time. It is not just about a past that resurfaces; we can also be haunted by lost futures. Degen and Hetherington (2001, 4) have suggested that building sites and new developments are just as likely to be haunted as cemeteries or abandoned buildings, ‘not just because of what they rub out but because within their expressions of novelty, pride, social engineering we find the tragic, ghostly voice of the future evoking the inevitable failure of such spatial dreamings.’ Elsewhere, I have suggested that, in a strange affective moment, groups of educational professionals became haunted by the futures of the children they were working with. Through embodied experiences such as cold shivers down spines or through tears that spread from body to body, educational professionals seemed to feel and experience, quite vividly, the futures that would be lost for children with the new extensive test systems they were about to implement (Pors, 2019, 2016a).

Ghostly encounters place those who meet them in different temporalities, grander temporalities that exceed the now and immediate future of for examples organizational implementation processes. They remind us how we are connected to past and future generations. As e.g. Sandra and Eve began to think about former generations in their house. Ghostly encounters remind us that our actions today do not only belong to the present but are entangled to much longer histories as well as futures. They remind us that we exist on different timescales and our actions do not just belong to the here and now and immediate future, but also to grander for example planetary time scales. Ghostly encounters, perhaps, make us notice how we, generations of humans, have already made animals and natural environments ghostly with our ideas of growth, optimization, pollution, colonizing.

Above all, ghostly encounters draw attention to how temporality is much more folded than linear time and its cousins of progress, development and growth suggest. Ghostly encounters evoke temporalities way beyond linear predictability, or any managerial or political calculation (Morton 2013, 67). They make it possible for those who allow themselves to be affected by them to challenge their ideas or, sometimes even addictions, to the linear time of growth and progress and suggest questions about strange foldings of time. They offer an analytical attention to how the forgotten, repressed and rubbished continue to linger (Edensor 2001, 2008), to how past questions or struggles are not as settled and solved as they might

appear, as well as to how futures we thought lost or had forgotten sometimes make themselves felt again.

### **The capacities of bodies to be affected**

The final set of questions that I think the ghost story from Chapel Road has to offer evolve around complex relationships between intuition and knowledge and between things we have a language for and things that we do not, but that none the less feel real. These are questions about what it means to sense and intuit something at the boundaries of what you can explain, what you know, what you can consciously perceive. Let us listen to Sandra and Eve again:

It is just like that. You know. You do not know where it comes from, but there is just this energy. I cannot explain it, but you can sense it. Some kind of energy that you cannot explain but exist right next to you.

I cannot ... I have no idea what it is. I simply have no words that can explain that feeling. I think what comes closest is how, once in a while you sense that someone is looking at you. That is the feeling I get. Of a presence.  
I do not believe in things like this, but I did see her, so I really do not know.  
How *do* you sense things? I do not know.

Sandra and Eve describe here that they have experienced something that they do not know what is. It is beyond knowledge. It is something beyond what can be explained. Also, they express that it is beyond words, beyond what they can capture in the language available to them. None the less, it is something. It is an affective energy, a strange feeling that someone is looking at you, that something is present, that something lets itself be felt. They describe that this affective presence, this energy, is something beyond what they as thinking subjects believe in. But, paradoxically, they still insist that there was something, to be seen, to be felt. The ghostly experience places them in a strange situation of having experienced something, for which they have no words, in which they do not even believe. This whole thing somehow leads them to hesitate, doubt, and wonder about what it actually means to experience, to feel, to sense things.

What questions do this open up? We are here facing questions about the capacities of bodies to sense and know more than what they have words for. The ghost story offers to us tricky questions about the capacities of bodies to affect and be affected by intensities that cannot be captured in language and operate at the threshold of conscious thinking and action. These are questions about the subject's affective openness to something outside itself, outside its own intellectual apparatus, and thus, questions that may trouble the idea of a confined subject and clear-cut boundaries between self and other (Blackman 2012).

Above, I refrained from asking psychological questions with the argument that it reduces the complexity of the situation to questions about individuals. It is probably fair to say that alongside psychology, management studies could be said to be one of the disciplines that

excels in producing and utilizing this epistemological construct of a confined, human being affectively isolated from his environment. All too familiar to organization scholars are all of the academic and organizational hope, money and efforts invested in the idea of a strong, skillful and effective individual business leader (see Ford 2015). But, what the ghost story from Chapel Road offers us is a set of questions that helps to challenge this notion of a confined, autonomous, self-conscious subject. It offers possibilities of critiquing what Teresa Brennan (2004) has called the foundational fantasy of a secure distinction between an individual and her environment. It opens questions about how the subject might be more open and porous, thus capable of being affectively moved by intensities operating in different registers than those of language and consciousness.

The ghost story from Chapel Road is, thus, also host to a set of questions about affects in organizations and about the capacities of bodies to be affected by something they do not know what is and do not have a language for. The ghost story offers wonderings about whether organizational subjects are perhaps more porous and permeable, less in control of their own thinking and action, than we perhaps normally assume with our concepts of the individual (Blackman 2012). All of a sudden, organizational phenomena such as experience, knowledge, agency decision-making are much more complex matters, as these no longer simply belong to a confined rational or semi-rational individual. Most importantly, I think, we get a more complex and challenging concept of subjectivity in organization. One which is more accommodating to trans-subjective processes: As Marianna Fotaki, Kate Kenny, and Sheena Vachhani (2017, 4) have phrased it, affect ‘is a force that places people in a co-subjective circuit of feeling, thinking and sensation.’ This is a concept of subjectivity that emphasizes our interdependencies on each other (Kenny and Fotaki 2015). As I have proposed, the subject finds itself entangled to past and future generations. And, as I now add, the subject is revealed to be more porous and permeable and connected to certain energies and, thus, perhaps placed in more collective affective circuits of experience.

### **What organization studies may learn from ghostly encounters**

What I have done until now is to see how far I could get with a perhaps slightly obsessive compulsion to extract questions from this fantastic, exotic, perhaps by some standards small or marginal story of a ghost at Chapel Road. You might say that I have been trying to push some new habits of academic attention (Blackman 2019) by being very careful with my questions, trying to avoid questions that too quickly make the ghostly, the riddle or the mystery disappear. My empirical data has been a, perhaps slightly silly, or at least arguably sketchy, ghost story. However, if we think with other forms of – let us call it more normal – empirical data about certain things, people, processes in organization, how often do we not jump too quickly to forms of explanation that make the mystery, or that which might be really interesting go away in a flash? I know I have done that numerous times. How often does the scholar ignore those parts of an interview that do not immediately make sense within the theoretical framework she

has already chosen? Attending to ghostly matters requires scholars to be a bit slower in their judgements of relevant and irrelevant in our empirical material. Also, perhaps there is a tendency in organization studies to expel the ghostly by reading a little bit of extra rationality and causality into the statements of informants, thus missing out on the complexity and uncertainty that might hold the potential to challenge the categories that are worked with in this discipline.

Moreover, perhaps there are also ghost exorcising mechanisms build into our theoretical concepts. With concepts such as, e.g. institutional logics, do we not explain away too quickly the profound mysteries of how people and groups of people come to adopt certain truths and assumptions? To attend to ghostly matters requires very careful work with questions and constant wonderings about whether and how certain concepts may sneak in too many explanations that silence other questions before it got interesting, before we got to the mystery. In the last part of the paper, I will try to situate more carefully, what I have said so far, in organization studies, trying to identify what, more specifically, an attention to ghostly matters may add.

#### *At home*

An organization studies that is more attentive to ghostly matters would be one that asks questions about who and what gets to feel at home in contemporary organizations. Such an organization studies – which is of course not new nor particularly rare, particularly in this journal – is one that asks questions about how organizations make, sometimes violent, distinctions between what kind of values, people and practices that are at home, that can feel at home in organizations and what kind of values, people and practices are labelled as foreign and non-belonging. There are many excellent studies of how certain bodies, bodies of certain skin color, female or elderly bodies, or bodies with different disabilities are not allowed to feel at home in different organizations (e.g. Duncan and Loretto 2004; Riach, Rumens and Tyler 2014; Riach 2007), so maybe I am not adding a lot. However, what I have tried to suggest is that thinking about ghostly matters is about training our analytical sensitivities to uncanny atmospheres – so that we notice how things that present themselves as natural and necessary are rarely unambiguously that. This might be in the form of noticing and making a lot out of what at first might seem like small and unimportant moment where the people we study experience a strange, itchy feeling that the organizational reality they normally take for granted as neutral and natural is a lot more than that. We may learn to pay more attention to that which is transmitted through small cracks, gaps, hesitations or silences. This could be moments of doubts where our informants begin to wonder about how their own daily practices are part of political, and possibly violent forces that allow familiar narratives to sustain their hegemony as familiar and thus make certain people, things and values homeless and unwanted.

#### *Temporality*

In recent years, a lot of effort has gone into re-thinking temporality in organization studies. Scholars have investigated how companies make use of temporality strategically. How the history is staged and strategically mobilized to produce brand value (Wadhvani et al. 2018; Schultz and Hernes 2013). Also, under the concept of ‘future making’, scholars have studied the discourses and technologies that are mobilized to imagine, test, stabilize and reify abstract ideas into realizable strategic projects (Comi and Whyte 2018). Moreover, scholars have explored the polychronicity that might exist in certain organizations and how different speeds, rhythms etc. may sometimes come to collide (Andersen and Pors 2016). Furthermore, attention is currently drawn to tensions between the short term and long term in strategic decisions about innovation and sustainability (Bansal et al. 2019).

Again, I am not entirely sure how much extra an attention to ghostly encounters can add. But let us try. I do not think it is entirely unfair to say that, traditionally, organization studies has specialized in moderate timescales, or we could call it human timescales. It has focused on the life span of strategy processes, product development and new market formation. Sometimes, in the case of business history, it can deal with the entire history of a corporation stretched over more than a hundred years (Mordhorst 2014). However, we rarely study organizations in grander time scales, where we ask questions about what conditions, values, problems and purposes particular organizations have inherited and what problems, conditions, challenges and values they pass on to future generation. In present day, these are extremely timely questions. Grander time scales and possibly lost or threatened futures should be on our mind, considering climate change, the melting of ice and mass extinction of biological species. By positioning organizations in grander temporalities, we can draw more attention to the relationships between organizations and those who are not yet born or those who are already dead, we can investigate the entanglements between organizations and current transformations of our planet and natural environments.

As organization scholars, we have perhaps inherited a normative tilt towards growth, development, progress. However, an organization studies that is attentive to ghostly matters is one that not only questions linear time, but also draws attention to how ideas of progress and growth have a number of powerful effects. With linear time certain things, people and values can be relegated to the past, be made disposable and to be gotten rid of. Things, people and values are made ghostly – organizational living dead (Gabriel 2012; Orr 2014). Being attentive to ghostly matters is to notice how the past lingers although organizations claim to move hastily towards the new, and thus work to bring that which was displaced and forgotten back in circulation (Blackman 2019). It is to keep reminding organizations, including universities, about the questions that used to be important, but are now silenced, or the questions that will be important in the futures and might not yet be entirely lost.

*Intuition and the capacity of bodies to be moved*

I have suggested that the ghost story from Chapel Road may help us challenge an epistemological construct in management studies of a confined and bounded individual. It would be too lengthy at this point here to thoroughly argue why this notion of the individual is problematic. I will simply take a point of departure in Loacker and Muhr's (2009) as well as Pullen and Rhodes' (2015, 2014) work on business ethics where they show how possibilities of ethical relations are closed down when ethics is thought of as something that can mainly be achieved by individual managers or by giving individuals formal roles as ethics officers.

Similar to what I have done, scholars have questioned the notion of the individual by way of the concept of affect (Harding, Ford and Lee 2017; Bell and Vachhani 2020). Many scholars have worked to introduce the concept of affect to organization studies (e.g. Fotaki, Kenny and Vacchani 2017). Here, affect usually refers to those registers of experience which cannot easily be seen and which might be described as non-cognitive, trans-subjective, non-conscious (Ratner and Pors 2013).

It has been important, I think, to distinguish very clearly between emotion and affect. To thoroughly add something new to a rich tradition of studying emotions at work, emotional work, emotional self-work, care etc. scholars have carefully described affect as non-cognitive, pre-subjective, pre-linguistic. Famously, some theories of affect draw on neuroscience to define affect as those forces and intensities that are at work in the half-second delay between when the brain can be measured to react to a stimulus and when this stimulus is consciously registered (Massumi 2002). This is the half second delay between affect and cognition (Thrift 2004). Affect is thereby defined as something outside the reach of and somewhat isolated from cognition and consciousness.

As stated, I think it has been important to separate affect from the social, from the discursive, particularly in order to be able to undermine the idea of an autonomous rational individual. However, I also think attending to ghostly matters can enrich further, how we think about the capacities of bodies to move and be moved in organization studies. The ghost in this paper is neither an emotional reaction in a confined individual nor an affective force outside of and autonomous from the social, the political and the historical.

Drawing on Ruth Leys (2011) and Lisa Blackman (2012, 2019), my point is that by using concepts of affect developed by Brian Massumi and Spinoza that stress that affect is a biological, pre-discursive, non-intentional force, we risk decoupling affect from the social, from ideology and power (see also Hemmings 2005) and from history. In our attempts to use the concept of affect to undo the idea of a confined, coherent individual, there is a tendency to bolster the distinctions between psychology and biology, self and other, the discursive and the corporeal, the social and the material, the present and the past. Thinking with ghostly encounters offers the possibility of disturbing the tendency to operate with a confined, conscious individual without coming to depend upon a concept of affect isolated from questions of cognition, meaning, history and ideology. Ghostly encounters invite us to conceive of subjectivity as something which is discourse and matter, thought and body, present and

historical, affect and conscious observations of affect. Subjectivity, I argue, is socio-material-historical processes through and through, involving flesh and statements, tears and words, shivering bodies and conscious opinions (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos 2015, 153). What is a ghost if not the strange meeting point between the material and the immaterial, the personal and the political, the here and now and the past? To encounter a ghost, to have your body affected by intensities you cannot explain, reveals the complexity of personhood as strange entanglements of the psychological, affective, corporeal, social, historical and political. It is worth here, to also refer to Avery Gordon's (2008) seminal book, *Ghostly Matters. Haunting and the sociological imagination*. For Gordon, the ghost and ghostly matters are always a socio-political-psychological state that reveals how individual affective experiences are entangled to broader social and political forces.

## Conclusion

I have tried to push that to be attentive to ghostly encounters, is to look out for the moments in which categories that normally hold the power to fix and organize, for some strange reason, fail to do so. A ghostly encounter intrudes on our categories of thought, intrudes on thinking itself. An such an opportunity, I have argued, should be seized by scholars of organisation eager to push the boundaries of our discipline. To attend to and analytically care for ghostly encounters can be one way of not disregarding or omitting what we might at first find weird, uncanny or unreliable in our empirical data. It can help scholars tune into the 'immense forces of atmosphere' (Benjamin, 1978, p. 182) found in the everyday workings of organisations.

To encounter something ghostly is to inherit. And, what we inherit is a call, a call to think, a call to question, a call to question what questions are possible in certain places at certain times. To inherit is, of course a responsibility. Karen Barad puts it like this:

to speak with ghosts, is not to entertain or reconstruct some narrative of the way it was, but to respond, to be responsible, to take responsibility for that which we inherit (from the past and the future), for the entangled relationalities of inheritance that 'we' are, to acknowledge and be responsive to the non-contemporaneity of the present, to put oneself at risk, to risk oneself (which is never one or self), to open oneself up to indeterminacy in moving towards what is to come (Barad 2010, 25)

In organization studies, we have a rich inheritance of exploring profoundly interesting trans-disciplinary questions: Complex questions about rationality, collectivity, collective action, power, change, subjectivity and charisma. However, like other sciences, we have also inherited a tendency to sometime close down interesting questions in the name of scientific progress, that is often, the settling and taming of tensions, uncertainty and controversy. Ghostly encounters may remind us that we have inherited a responsibility to ask questions about what interesting questions, rich insight and possibilities of politicizing became silenced or displaced in the forward march of organization studies. We are called upon to take responsibility for the past and the future of our scholarly collective. We inherit a responsibility to listen to those that



are already dead as well as those who have not yet been born. Let me finish with these two questions: What kinds of analytical attentiveness and sensitivities do we want to inherit? How do future organizational inquiries look like that do not occlude those experiences that exist at the threshold of what we have a language for?

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