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Queering the Screen: Spectral Figures and German-Taiwanese Encounters in Monika Treut's *Ghosted*

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In queer German director Monika Treut's film *Ghosted* (2009), a plethora of screen apparatuses, including cameras, laptops, and cellphones, mediate encounters among the German protagonist, Sophie Schmitt; her Taiwanese girlfriend, Ai-ling; and Ai-ling's spectral doppelgänger, Mei-li. Examining how the screen bestows visibility on the otherwise elusive figure of the queer Asian woman while limiting her freedom, this article explores how the comparatively more fluid apparitional lesbian challenges the domesticating effect of racially charged looks by destabilizing various borders between life and death, past and present, the real and the imaginary. Although Treut valorizes the ghost's unfathomable nature as its source of power, a full acceptance of the spectre's opacity and epistemological differences inherently conflicts with the desire to bridge German and East Asian cultures.

Keywords: Asian German studies, encounters, screen, ghost, spectrality, opacity

Introduction

In their seminal article "Has the Queer Ever Been Human?" Dana Luciano and Mel Y. Chen propose the concept of "queer inhumanisms" to challenge existing conceptions of the human as a rigid, bounded, and holistic construct superior to other forms of existence. Here *queerness* not only designates "human sexual nonnormativities" but also functions as "a tool of incessant unsettling, restless refusal of all forms of identity, or as an extensible collection or assemblage of overlapping and mutually imbricated forms of gendered, sexual, and other corporealized dissidence" (189–92). "Queer inhumanisms" move beyond human conceptions of identity and alterity by valorizing nonconformative bodies, inanimate objects, and entities previously deemed to be "sub-human, in-human," and "other-than-human" (186, 195). At the same time, the non-human is understood not so much as opposed to the human as pushing against the boundary between

the two, thereby transforming humanity into flexible constructs composed of different identities, entities, and materialities (186).

Contemporary German cinema shows a fascination with such inhuman subjects. In keeping with this fascination, a number of transcultural and transnational films employ the figure of the ghost to address notions of otherness in their portrayal of queer migrants of colour (Dawson 33). From Doris Dörrie's Japan-themed trilogy *Kirschblüten—Hanami* (*Cherry Blossoms*, 2008), *Griße aus Fukushima* (*Greetings from Fukushima* or *Fukushima mon Amour*, 2016), and *Kirschblüten & Dämonen* (*Cherry Blossoms and Demons*, 2019) to Ulrike Ottinger's *Unter Schnee* (*Under Snow*, 2011), Asian demons, ghosts, and apparitions come to both haunt the German protagonists and lead them through enlightening journeys of self-discovery. In these narratives, the whimsical, fluid, and inscrutable aspects of the ghost invariably coincide with the unfathomable nature of the Asian Other (Williams 271, 274).

In German director Monika Treut's film *Ghosted* (*Ai Mei* 曖昧, 2009), the spectre's encounter with the human is complicated by another inanimate but powerful object: the screen. The film features a wide variety of screen apparatuses in its portrayal of a lesbian relationship between the German protagonist, Sophie Schmitt; her Taiwanese girlfriend, Chen Ai-ling; and, after Ai-ling's death, her spectral doppelgänger, Wang Mei-li. Karl Schoonover and Rosalind Galt argue that "to understand queerness in the world, [...] we have to think not just about the representations on-screen but about the cinematic apparatus itself, its mechanisms of articulation, and its modes of transnational circulation" (4). This article hence explores the multi-layered roles that screens play in negotiating German-Taiwanese encounters and the ways in which the inhuman spectre "queers" the screen's politics of representation. I argue that the digital cameras, computer screens, and cellphones in *Ghosted* serve both as an interface connecting the seemingly distant cultures of Western Europe and East Asia and as a site where the traditionally marginalized figure of the queer Asian woman acquires visibility. However, at the same time that the screen provides a ground for the Taiwanese migrant's existence in Germany, it also constrains her personhood, as Ai-ling becomes constantly subjected to the gaze of the privileged white German. In direct contrast to Ai-ling's confinement within the screen apparatus, the ghost is characterized by mobility, fluidity, and versatility; transcending the screen-enclosed environment with ease, Mei-li appears not to be contained within the grid but rather destabilizes the various borders between life and death, past and present, the real and the imaginary. The apparitional lesbian in *Ghosted* "queers" the screen by reversing its gaze regime and challenging the established logic of temporal and spatial stability. In the process of un-becoming human, the ghost in fact escapes from the Asian lesbian's lived realities of objectification. In this sense, Treut's film gestures toward a politics of opacity, whereby the ghost's alterity and incomprehensibility are not negated but lived with. At the same time, however, a full acceptance of the ghost's inscrutability stands in direct opposition to the desire to bridge German and East Asian culture.

The Liminality of the Spectre and the Screen

Ghosted opens with a scene showing the Taiwanese protagonist, Chen Ai-ling, leaving Taiwan for Hamburg in search of her uncle Chen Fu, a restaurant owner. Later we learn from a biological test, secretly conducted by Ai-ling, that Chen Fu is in fact her biological father. The second sequence of the film abruptly cuts to five months later, showing German filmmaker Sophie Schmitt exhibiting her video installation *Remembrance* at a Taipei art gallery. The installation features images of Sophie's now-deceased girlfriend, Ai-ling. At the event, Sophie meets Wang Mei-li, a self-proclaimed journalist for *The Taipei News*. When Mei-li enquires about Sophie's relationship with Ai-ling, Sophie recounts that they met at a movie theatre in Hamburg, forming a friendship that quickly turned into romance. Nevertheless, Sophie gradually became weary of Ai-ling's overdependence on her and started making new connections with a young Taiwanese filmmaker, Judy. Disheartened, Ai-ling went to a bar and befriended a lesbian lawyer, Katrin Bendersen. The story of Ai-ling's encounter with Katrin is abruptly terminated, however, when the next scene cuts again to five months later, showing Mei-li coming to visit Sophie in Hamburg after the exhibition in Taipei has ended. Mei-li soon develops a romantic relationship with Sophie. Mei-li also finds out that on the night when Ai-ling visited the bar, Sophie unexpectedly returned home early. Upon receiving Sophie's phone call, Ai-ling tried to let go of the rather aggressive Katrin but was accidentally hit and killed by a car. After this flashback, the narrative shifts once more to the present. Sophie learns from an online identity-check agency that there has never been a person named Mei-li who worked for *The Taipei News* or entered Germany. Rather, Mei-li is merely a spectral double of Ai-ling. This complex lesbian relationship is finally resolved when Sophie revisits Taiwan to attend a traditional memorial ceremony for Ai-ling, during which the apparitions of Ai-ling and Mei-li smilingly depart from their former lover. Such a convoluted narrative, which crosses the cultural and the geographical border between Germany and Taiwan, the existential border between life and death, and the temporal border between past and present, is inextricably linked to the liminal objects of the spectre and the screen.

The liminal status of the ghost consists first and foremost in its paradoxical existence. Jacques Derrida describes the spectre as "the invisible visible, it is the visibility of a body which is not present in flesh and blood. It resists the intuition to which it presents itself, it is not tangible" (Derrida and Stiegler 115). The ghost is a deconstructive figure that "make[s] established certainties vacillate" and collapses stable boundaries (Davis 376). Oscillating between presence and absence, materiality and immateriality, and life and death (Gunning 99), phantasmatic images of the ghost represent precisely that which escapes full comprehension (Blanco and Peeren, "Introduction" 9). In Chinese culture, the ghost—*gui* (鬼, Cantonese *guai*)—likewise symbolizes "the anxiety of the unknown, the different, and the outsider" (Esler 516). In colloquial Cantonese, *guai lou* (or *gui lau* 鬼佬 in Mandarin, literally "ghost man") means "foreigner," while the term *mat guai* (麼鬼, or *shenme gui* 什麼鬼 in Mandarin, literally

“what ghost”) designates either what is forgotten or that of which one is unsure and skeptical (Esler 516).

In addition to being an ambivalent, contradictory figure that embodies the uncertain, the distant, and the foreign, the ghost also oscillates between being the object of vision and the subject/possessor of the gaze. María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren expound that spectre and spectrality “evoke an etymological link [...] to that which is both *looked at* (as fascinating spectacle) and *looking* (in the sense of examining), suggesting their suitability for exploring and illuminating phenomena other than the putative return of the dead” (“Introduction” 2). This elusive nature of the ghost further blurs the boundary between identification and difference. As Carla Freccero argues:

[T]o enable the melancholic object-other to emerge and to demand from “within” the self, there must be identification, if not identity, between the subject and object. And yet, at the same time, for that object to demand, to become (a ghost), somehow to materialize, it must have a subjectivity of its own; it must, therefore, be other/different. (205)

In *Ghosted*, Mei-li’s spectral identity exemplifies this dichotomy between visibility and vision, identity and alterity. Although she inherits parts of Ai-ling’s memories and retraces Ai-ling’s steps in Germany, Mei-li’s self-proclaimed profession as a journalist and her independence from Sophie allow her to carve out an existence beyond the shadows of her predecessor. In fact, Sophie is attracted to Mei-li because she reminds the German filmmaker of something familiar, while embodying a fascinating otherness (Kuzniar 180). Nevertheless, the spectral figure is not only an intriguing spectacle but also a possessor of unmediated vision. Whereas Ai-ling’s gaze at Sophie is always filtered by the viewfinder, since Sophie insistently films and photographs her girlfriend at every turn, Mei-li’s gaze transcends the limits of the screen. This is especially evident when, during the exhibition at the art gallery, Treut presents equally numbered shots and reverse shots of Sophie and Mei-li exchanging looks at each other, while Ai-ling’s gaze at Sophie flatly lies behind Mei-li as shadow images on the silver screen. Hence, the queer Asian woman and her spectral doppelgänger should not be taken as interchangeable, as some would argue (Kuzniar 181), but as separate beings with disparate goals, desires, and power.

Similar to the liminal object of the spectre, the screen is also an embodiment of in-betweenness. As a spatial entity dividing a physical environment, the screen shields, protects, disguises, or hides objects behind it from those in the front (Huhtamo 277–82). As an optical device, the screen is often allegorized as a window, frame, or mirror, which separates, depicts, or reflects a fragment of our surrounding world (Casetti 157–58). Regardless of its specific function in particular contexts, the screen always renders a portion of a space invisible or dysfunctional at the same time that it opens up new ground. For instance, the silver screen of a traditional movie theatre grants spectators opportunities to fully immerse themselves in the filmic diegesis while temporarily severing their ties to the outside reality. In this sense, the screen is not merely a passive

object awaiting human disposal but a powerful actor that continuously carves out our immediate milieu, influencing both the visual and physical fields of our existence.¹

The transient nature of queer Asian womanhood in cultural discourses makes it a rare occurrence in German cinema. Terry Castle argues that the lesbian figure in modern life is always “in the shadows, in the margins, hidden from history, out of sight, out of mind, a wanderer in the dusk, a lost soul, a tragic mistake, a pale denizen of the night” (2). Queers of colour are frequently absent from discourses of globalization and cosmopolitanism (Rushbrook 184), and Western, Orientalist conceptualizations of racialized populations often denigrate the Global South for being either “too queer” or “not queer-friendly enough” (Muñoz et al. 212).² Although German cinema has a long history of representing gay and lesbian desires ever since *Anders als die Andern* (*Different from the Others*, directed by Richard Oswald, 1919) and *Mädchen in Uniform* (*Girls in Uniform*, directed by Leontine Sagan, 1931), it was not until the 1990s and the early 2000s that queer German filmmakers would portray Asian female subjectivities (Kuzniar 176; Fitzpatrick).

In Monika Treut’s film, the screen bestows visibility on the otherwise elusive figure of the queer Asian woman, but it also limits her freedom and sanctions her existence solely within the parameters of the screen-enclosed frame. Sophie’s passion for making ethnographic films featuring the Taiwanese community compensates for German cinema’s previous lack of attention to queer Asian German women. However, at the same time that Ai-ling stands at the centre of focus in Sophie’s film projects, video installations, and computer screens, she becomes trapped and contained by the very apparatus that grants her visibility to German society. In Hamburg, Ai-ling finds consolation only when she stays within the Taiwanese enclave and interacts with a few acquaintances at Chen Fu’s restaurant. When venturing into public spaces, Ai-ling either constantly poses for Sophie’s gazing camera or has to remain in the sheltered space of Sophie’s car. Even in the only scene where Ai-ling jogs alone, her solitude is quickly terminated by a phone call from her mother, and their conversation revolves around Sophie’s documentary about the Taiwanese in Germany. In this sense, Ai-ling’s overdependence on Sophie is largely predicated on her insecurity and inability to survive without the screen apparatus at the German filmmaker’s disposal. When Ai-ling sees how Taiwanese filmmaker Judy forms a close relationship with Sophie, she becomes irrationally jealous. Ai-ling’s inability to distinguish Sophie’s film projects from the life outside of them attests to her entangled relationship to the screen. She seemingly equates a dominant role in the film with proof of Sophie’s love for her, feeling her status jeopardized at the slightest provocation. Therefore, Ai-ling decides to venture out on her own when Sophie forgets about their scheduled trip to the North Sea because she is too immersed in watching and editing Judy’s film interview. Unfortunately, however, Ai-ling’s only self-guided adventure away from the screen results in her demise. Her brief, unmediated encounter with Katrin ends tragically with an untimely phone call, indicating that escape from

the very screen that grounds her existence in Germany will necessarily result in the punishment of death.

Ai-ling's entrapment in the German filmmaker's screen becomes an allegory for the imbalance of power in contemporary German-East Asian encounters. Applied metaphorically, the screen functions as a veil through which we perceive the Other. According to W. J. T. Mitchell's discussion of the Lacanian screen, "to see the Other is always to see through a veil or screen, a grid-work of stereotypes of gender, class, race, emotional condition, and physiognomy" (238). The screen does not have to take a physical form; instead, it could be understood as "the cultural reserve of which every image is one instance," incorporating "conventions of art, the schemata of representation, [and] the codes of visual culture" (Foster 109). Hence, to see through the screen is to organize and interpret the Other based on cultural conventions of race and gender that serve as the stereotypical template on which perception is conditioned. The physical screen of Sophie's camera therefore symbolizes the larger conceptual screen of mainstream German society, which readily filters out exotic aspects of Taiwanese culture for its own amusement. Sophie's documentary about Taiwanese conceptions of spectrality, the German customers' disgust toward the chicken feet that Ai-ling and her friends eat at Chen Fu's restaurant, and the repeated occurrence of Asian-Buddhist sacrificial rituals in the film become the only points of entry through which German audiences could be introduced to East Asian culture.

Ai-ling's precarious existence in Germany is not an isolated occurrence. Even Chen Fu, who has been living in Germany for decades, cannot escape the fate of ethnic ghettoization: having once owned five restaurants, he nonetheless had to close three of them owing to intense competition from "the Vietnamese, the Mainland Chinese, and the Koreans," according to Ai-ling's co-worker. As the narrative proceeds, Chen Fu is threatened and possibly blackmailed by another Asian man, who eventually takes over Chen Fu's business and forces him to repatriate. The in-group dynamic of the Asian community is thus far from harmonic but full of economic rivalry. Therefore, the marginalization of the Taiwanese community in Germany is twofold: not only is their culture exoticized through ethnographic documentaries, ethnic cuisine, and performance of traditional religious ceremonies, but German society's overly generalized conception of *Asiatische Deutsche* merely creates a falsified sense of coherence when in fact the diverse and multi-faceted histories, traditions, and populations of Asia make the emigrant groups anything but a monolithic whole.

In addition to portraying the in-group dynamics of the emigrant groups, *Ghosted* also explores the theme of transnational migration through the metaphor of Ai-ling's paternity test. Ai-ling's obsession with the test signals her intense attachment to the past and inability to look toward the future; constantly searching for her biological roots, she lacks the courage to venture out from her native community and fully embrace her queer sexuality. Here the issue of paternity functions as an allegory for home, an ambivalent site for diasporic queers of colour, a place of both resistance and refuge (Puar 939). As Sara Ahmed argues, home acquires a fluid definition as not only the place where one usually lives,

the place where one's family lives, or one's native country but also the "space from which one imagines oneself to have originated" (77). It is less a physical locale or geographical territory than a sentimentalized space of belonging (89). Ai-ling's strong belief in the validity of biological paternity directly motivates her to reunite with Chen Fu in Germany after the death of her nominal father, who is also Chen Fu's older brother. At the same time, she is afraid to fully acknowledge her "uncle" as her real father, resolving to conduct the paternity test secretly and keep the results to herself. Ai-ling's ambivalent feelings toward paternity symbolize a simultaneous attachment to her native country and a fear that this same culture will reject her because of her new-found homosexuality. While *Ghosted* acknowledges the existence of alternative sexualities in Taiwan, it suggests that the society still discriminates against the LGBT community, as compared to Germany's seemingly higher acceptance of queer desires. When Ai-ling calls her mother, she cautiously refers to Sophie as her landlady and says that she likes Sophie very much, without declaring their relationship as romantic. Ai-ling's complex relationship to her homeland is resolved at the end of the film through posthumous repatriation. By opening and concluding with traditional Taiwanese memorial ceremonies, the overarching structure of *Ghosted* relegates Ai-ling's experiences in Germany as a mere interlude in a circular movement of departure from home and homecoming. Indeed, Ai-ling's vulnerable homosexuality cannot resist what the film depicts as the trap of a more conservative culture in her home country, which pulls her back like a magnet. Ai-ling's storyline thus does not contest German cinema's stereotypically Orientalist narrative arc, in which the Asian woman never escapes the fate of a tragic death and desire for the queer Other is always predestined to fail.

In this sense, the spheres of culture divided by the metaphorical screen in *Ghosted* are not equally valorized. Whereas contacts with Ai-ling contribute to Sophie's professional advancement, immigration to the West ends catastrophically for the queer Asian woman. The German filmmaker is free to photograph, edit, and assemble images of her girlfriend and commodify them after Ai-ling has died, while the Taiwanese character is never in the position of power to hold the camera and determine the representation of her own subjectivity. Indeed, to reside by the screen is to cede one's independence, submit to its powerful effect of filtering and othering, and resign oneself to its creation of unequal power dynamics. Forever trapped, Ai-ling is never fully capable of venturing out of her native culture. Similar to her biological father, Chen Fu, whose immigration to Germany results in a precarious existence that can end only with repatriation, the queer Asian migrant does not possess the same degree of mobility as her German partner, even as she physically travels across continents with ease in this age of globalization.

Queering the Screen

In an interview for Sophie's documentary about the Taiwanese community in Hamburg, the filmmaker Judy claims, "Spirits, or ghosts, play an important part

in Taiwanese culture. Especially female ghosts will come back after they died to avenge what people have done to them.” Indeed, in East Asian contexts,

[h]aunting is often described as the eruption of the past into the present in a manner that effects the re-examination of past injustices and possibly leads to reparation. [...] [G]hostly memory is charged with a quasi-redemptive mission, and haunting bears the promise of historical revision. (Fuhrmann 64)

But who is being haunted in *Ghosted*, and what is there for Ai-ling’s spectral double, Mei-li, to take revenge on? Although Sophie seems to be the obvious target, the filmic narrative defies such a simplistic answer. Sophie neither feels troubled and dis-aligned upon getting in contact with the ghost (Kuzniar 179), nor receives any apparent retribution for her involvement in Ai-ling’s death; ironically, Mei-li offers Sophie her company in order to help Sophie “drive away the ghost of the past.”

Taking this narrative arrangement into account, I argue that Mei-li comes not so much to haunt Sophie as to “queer” the very screen apparatus that once constrained Ai-ling. Representing modes of relationality in opposition to “stratifying demarcations and taxonomies of being” (Muñoz et al. 210), queerness refers to a slippery, deconstructive force that counteracts the defined parameters within which the screen asserts its power of limitation, separation, and filtering. Ai-ling’s inability to escape from the screen’s control stands in contrast with her doppelgänger Mei-li’s relative mobility to transcend the framework of the medial apparatus and reverse the previous subject-object position. During the event at the Taipei art gallery, Mei-li is able not only to return Sophie’s gaze without the intervention of medial apparatuses, as I argue in the previous section, but also to reclaim her subjectivity by taking photos of Ai-ling’s image. If Sophie’s act of filming Ai-ling orientalizes the queer Asian woman by turning her into an exotic spectacle for the enjoyment of the mainstream German audience, Mei-li’s act of photographing her real-world double retakes control over the ability to modify and represent her self-image.

The extremely volatile and elusive figure of the spectre does not merely possess the capacity for self-determination; she also readily slips in and out of the screen, disregarding the clearly demarcated border defined by the liminal apparatus. In an ensuing scene, Sophie watches a video that shows Ai-ling performing tai chi. In the video, even though Ai-ling is hungry and wants to stop filming, Sophie asks her to keep going one more time. When Mei-li shows up unannounced at Sophie’s apartment, Sophie pauses the video to open the door. After a brief conversation, the two decide to leave for a day trip in Taipei. At this precise moment, an eerie, spiritual extradiegetic music announces an unexpected turn of events: Ai-ling’s image, previously frozen on Sophie’s computer screen, starts to move again, and after a brief glitch, a graphic match edit replaces Ai-ling with Mei-li, who is dressed in the same black shirt, has the same hairstyle, and performs the same movements. Before Mei-li’s appearance, Sophie is fully in charge of the unfolding of events, ready to stop, refilm, or replay the

video while Ai-ling passively obeys her command; when the spectre enters the scene, however, she not only lets Sophie conform to her wish to go out but also exerts direct influence on the screen by animating it. While the computer screen firmly constrains Ai-ling's personhood, Mei-li breaks the boundary between the virtual and the real, the past and the present, by existing simultaneously in and out of the apparatus. Moreover, Mei-li "queers" the orientalizing grid by defying the screen's stereotypical construct of a queer Asian woman to be looked at by the privileged white German. Performing tai chi in an empty room for no audience in particular, the spectre employs her dual embodiment of vision and visibility to thwart the objectifying regime of the screen within the diegesis.

Furthermore, the ghost's reversal of the screen's gaze regime also operates on a metalevel, as she seems to be conscious of queer cinema and queer film festivals' politics of exhibition, as well as of the ways in which the extradiegetic audience of *Ghosted* takes pleasure in this titillating transnational lesbian love story. For independent art-house film directors such as Monika Treut, film festivals are the primary venue through which their work could receive critical attention (Dawson and Treut 158–65). *Ghosted* was screened at about thirty major film festivals worldwide, but the vast majority of those were hosted in Europe, North America, and Australia ("*Ghosted*"; Chen, "Cinematic Visualization" 215). Its premiere at the Taipei and the Hong Kong international film festivals did not generate much critical acclaim or popular attention. As Bill Nichols argues, the film festival circuit serves as a cultural window through which "film tourists" could "submerge [them]selves in an experience of difference, entering strange worlds, hearing unfamiliar languages, witnessing unusual styles" (17). The travelogue narrative of *Ghosted* offers its Western audience precisely this opportunity for a vicarious trip—following the steps of the diegetic character Sophie—to the unfamiliar culture of Taiwan. Indeed, critics were quick to pick out Taiwanese mysticism, the colourful Taipei night market, and the interracial aspect of the romantic relationship as the major attractions of the film (Klemm; N. Lee; Scheck). As the first-ever German-Taiwanese co-produced narrative feature, *Ghosted* bears the mission of representing Taiwan as a society open to alternative sexualities as compared to mainland China (Mulky 44), an image that nevertheless has more currency overseas than at home: Mei-li's hospitality toward Sophie mainly appeals to the wanderlust of wealthy Western queer tourists who are privileged customers in the rapidly expanding global travel economy (Puar 943). The film mostly lets the European protagonist map homosexuality onto Taiwan rather than search for a previously existing queer community (Mulky 44). Without exploring Indigenous queerness, *Ghosted* subtly suggests how Taiwan's national body politic still excludes nonconformative bodies from its public spaces and only reluctantly acknowledges homosexuality in the case of the diasporic migrant.

Nonetheless, the spectral figure resists the domesticating gaze of the Western spectator by indicating her consciousness of being observed by the privileged white viewer. After the day trip in Taipei, Mei-li goes to Sophie's apartment again one day, only to see the room deserted. Mei-li finds a box containing

an album. As she quickly flips through it, her gaze finally lingers on a picture showing a close-up of Ai-ling's and Sophie's smiling faces. The next shot is an extreme close-up of Mei-li's eyes, which suddenly look up from the album and stare directly into the filming camera—and at the extradiegetic audience—for five seconds. The ensuing flashback features a montage sequence showing Ai-ling being filmed by Sophie at various places, with multiple cameras, as if seen through Mei-li's eyes.

In her book *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle*, Fatimah Tobing Rony argues, by referencing W. E. B. Du Bois and Frantz Fanon, that the racialized subject often develops a “double consciousness”; upon repeatedly seeing oneself being marked as an Other in the gaze of the white, the racialized subject gradually internalizes this racially charged glance by having “the sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others” (4). In fact, the racialized subject develops a third eye, which floats out of their body and observes everything “with the dispassionate air of a zoologist examining a specimen” (4). This third eye can “induce one to see the very process which creates the internal splitting, to witness the conditions which give rise to the double consciousness. [...] The veil allows for clarity of vision even as it marks the site of socially mediated self-alienation” (4).

In *Ghosted*, Mei-li's extended gaze at Ai-ling and Sophie's photo functions as a concrete representation of Rony's conception of the “third eye.” It reverses Ai-ling's previously passive submission under the gaze of the white filmmaker—and, by extension, that of mainstream German society—by consciously showing a recognition of this orientalizing visual regime. I would like to take Rony's argument one step further by asserting that Mei-li's direct gaze into Treut's camera “queers,” contests, and problematizes another layer created by the screen: the separation between the diegetic and the extradiegetic world. By staring directly at the extradiegetic audience, who are likely “film tourists” attending international film festivals, the ghost refuses to become an exotic spectacle silently awaiting the curious look of the Western spectator but declares her consciousness of how the contemporary politics of art-house film exhibition necessarily commodifies the alterity of smaller, less familiar cultures.

In addition to resisting the objectifying grid with a double consciousness of her alienation, the ghost further “queers” the temporal and spatial conventions of classical cinematic narratives. As Derrida argues, the fact that the spectre exceeds traditional knowledge allows it to be grasped “only in a dis-located time of the present, at the joining of a radically dis-jointed time” (17). Therefore, “[b]y repeating (via haunting) events thought to have been finished or laid to rest, the ghost film has the generic potential to unsettle the linear time of conventional narrative” (Lim 300). Through constructing a plot that is “out of sync, anachronistic, melancholic, spectral,” Treut's film takes up this potential of ghostly narratives by “detouring the linear drive of dramatic progression,” in a style similar to that of queer Taiwanese director Tsai Ming-liang (Ma 98–99). Specifically, Mei-li's appearance announces each time a shift between past and present, Taipei

and Hamburg, the real world and the dream world, thereby unleashing a dizzying effect that defies the rules of narrative coherence in mainstream cinema.

The slippery and liminal existence of the spectre takes the upper hand over conventional logics of continuity editing and linear narrative progression when Mei-li visits the bar where Ai-ling meets Katrin on the night of her death. The past is almost perfectly mapped onto the present, as Mei-li slides her hand across the iron rails and looks around before entering the bar, in almost the exact same manner as Ai-ling once did. Only a second later, Mei-li rushes into the bathroom and vomits into a sink, although the film does not explicitly show her drinking. The next shot shows Mei-li looking up at the bathroom mirror in a close-up. As her face becomes increasingly blurry, the film cuts to Ai-ling entering the same bathroom five months earlier and continues to recount the events leading up to the moment when Ai-ling is hit by a car. Surprisingly, the ensuing scene does not carry on with the narrative in Germany but shows a startled Mei-li waking up from this nightmare of Ai-ling's death, while still in Taiwan. In this puzzling sequence, Mei-li instantaneously relocates from Hamburg to Taiwan and from reality to the dream world, without explaining how, when, and why her acts of border crossing take place. While Ai-ling is overly attached to and thus bound by her native culture, Mei-li is free to disturb any spatial, temporal, and social boundaries without obvious consequences. Mei-li's creation of a fragmented, non-linear temporality and spatiality defies any simplistic interpretations. Indeed, the seemingly chaotic, non-causal structure of the narrative is precisely the ghost's source of power.

Difference and Opacity

Expanding on Derrida's theory of hauntology, Blanco and Peeren assert that the spectre proposes

in its paradoxical invisible visibility [...] “a deconstructive logic” that [...] undoes established binaries and challenges foundational, presentist, and teleological modes of thinking. The spectre is always already before us, confronting us with what precedes and exceeds our sense of autonomy, seeing us without being seen. [...] [It is] a figure of absolute alterity [...] that should [...] not be assimilated or negated (exorcized), but lived *with*. (“Spectral Turn” 33)

Instead of deciphering the secret that the ghost carries, Derrida proposes that we avoid any restoration of knowledge and instead “encounter what is strange, unheard, other, about the ghost” (Davis 378). Treut responds to this call by portraying a diverse array of inscrutable phenomena throughout the film, in addition to Mei-li's disorienting mobility and disruptive potential. For instance, Mei-li's body is so concrete and tangible that she is visible to everyone, a fact that makes her status as a ghost questionable. During an interview for Sophie's film, Judy claims, “Sometimes I'm not sure if I'm real or if I have disappeared into the net. Maybe all I am is the product of some other person's imagination.” In this sense, *Ghosted* contests a rigid separation between the living and the dead, instead

gesturing toward a world of permeable boundaries where every human could be a ghost, while every ghost could simultaneously be human.

Indeed, a number of figures whose status as human or ghost is ambiguous appear at the margins of the narrative, such as an elderly lady and a middle-aged man who seem to know everything about Mei-li, including her status as a ghost, while Mei-li has no knowledge of their identities. When the couple meet Mei-li for the first time, the middle-aged man asks Mei-li how she liked Sophie's exhibition without first introducing himself; in fact, he is surprised that Mei-li does not recognize him. During their second encounter, the unnamed visitors again appear unexpectedly, and the man accurately predicts that Mei-li will soon embark on a trip to Germany. Not only are the couple's questions uncalled for by the plot, but their onscreen presence is just as enigmatic: talking to Mei-li for only a few seconds each time, they always disappear as soon as Mei-li turns her head. Moreover, Mei-li also lives with a man named Tze-tien in Taiwan whose relationship to her is never explicitly explained. Appearing only as a voice rather than in the flesh, Tze-tien is another ghostly figure positioned at the borders between reality and virtuality. In addition to portraying such inscrutable spectres, *Ghosted* also makes references to a wide array of traditional Taiwanese religious symbolisms, providing brief explanations for some but not others. These include sacrificial rituals special to the seventh lunar month, or "Ghost Month," and *wangye* (王爺) deities—celestial emissaries who protect humans by driving away evil spirits (Chen, "Cinematic Visualization" 219). Without offering the (Western) audience information about where the minor ghosts come from and for what the religious rituals are intended, *Ghosted* in fact expounds a politics of opacity that maintains differences between the Self and the Other while accepting the ghost as unworkable, unapproachable, and unfathomable.

This politics of opacity is also reflected in the film's Chinese title, *Ai Mei* (曖昧). In popular perception, *aimei* is a quintessentially Chinese concept that describes unclear intentions, illicit affairs, ambiguous relationships "that [are] neither here nor there," and vaguely romantic emotions that exceed the boundaries of (heterosexual) friendship but do not yet reach the level of intensity in a committed partnership (Yang; Becky). This title most obviously refers to Ai-ling's homoerotic relationship with Sophie, which is not sanctioned by Taiwanese society and therefore must be kept secret. At the same time, *aimei* could also refer to director Monika Treut's relationship to Taiwanese culture, as well as German-East Asian connections in general. Recent scholarship on Asian German literature, visual culture, and socio-political history often characterizes this transnational exchange through the metaphor of "encounters." Examples include *Transcultural Encounters between Germany and India* (Cho et al.); *Beyond Alterity: German Encounters with Modern East Asia* (Shen and Rosenstock); and *Jewish Encounters with Buddhism in German Culture* (Musch), among many others. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term *encounter* typically refers to unexpected, undesigned, accidental, and casual meetings. Having its root in the Latin word *contra* ("against"), it hints at potential conflicts

and oppositions (“Encounter”; “Encounter, *n.*”). The German equivalent, *Begegnung*, coming from the root *gegen*, evokes such concepts as *erwidern*, *entgegenkommen*, or *gegenüberstehen* (“Gegen” 306), all of which assume an inherently oppositional, confrontational relationship between the subject and the object. *Encounter* and *Begegnung* are related to the Chinese concept of *aimei* in two respects. First, these terms all tend to describe brief meetings rather than extended engagements that could give rise to higher levels of intimacy. Second, all have negative connotations that describe the tension, illegitimacy, and discord that lie beneath a facade of peaceful, harmonious exchanges.

Sophie’s engagement with Taiwanese culture bears the characteristics of these metaphorical terms. Toward the end of the film, Sophie comes to Taiwan for a second time to attend Ai-ling’s memorial ceremony. She is first welcomed by Ai-ling’s mother, Ya-ching, into the family restaurant where Ai-ling’s spirit tablet is placed. Here, even outside of Germany, the Western protagonist’s engagement with Taiwan cannot escape the stereotypical trope of ethnic cuisine. Ya-ching soon gives her a bag of paper money to be burned at the ceremony. Sophie asks Ya-ching what it is, and the mother replies by saying, “Well, you have to learn more about Taiwan.” Even after having had two relationships with Taiwanese women and made a film about the Taiwanese community in Germany, Sophie’s engagement with this culture lingers at the level of brief encounters and ambiguous romance, which Ai-ling’s family might have suspected but not explicitly acknowledged. Even though Sophie’s exploration of Taiwan remains limited and superficial, her liaison with Ai-ling still unleashes the destabilizing, deconstructive power of the ghost, a fact that reveals the treacherous undercurrent that always runs under transnational engagements between Germany and East Asia. In comparison, Treut’s engagement with Taiwanese culture appears to be more substantial. Not only did she take a few Chinese language courses at the University of Hamburg, but her documentary trilogy—*Den Tigerfrauen wachsen Flügel* (*Tigerwomen Grow Wings*, or 母老虎飛飛飛, 2005), *Mädchengeschichten: Made in Taiwan* (2005, a thirty-minute TV documentary episode commissioned by the ZDF), and *Das Rohe und das Gekochte* (*The Raw and the Cooked: A Culinary Journey through Taiwan*, or 生食和熟食, 2012)—was filmed over seven years under close collaboration with local acquaintances, thereby suggesting a longer, more continuous connection with Taiwan.

But does Treut really transcend the level of “encounters,” and does her politics of opacity successfully eliminate the danger that typically accompanies transnational interactions between Germany and East Asia? Rey Chow argues:

[W]hat begins as a mobilization for political change based on an interest in/respect for the cultural difference of our others [...] can easily grow into its ugly opposite. That is to say, the promotion of a type of politics that is based on the need to distinguish between “differences” may consequently lead [...] to an oppression that springs from the transformation of “difference” into “superiority.” (339)

In this sense, accepting the ghost as distinct from the human, while acknowledging that a complete comprehension of the spiritual culture that she represents is neither possible nor necessary, is a double-edged sword that could turn against the intention for political empowerment when done without discretion. On the one hand, in an age of globalization where transnational encounters are frequent and inevitable, maintaining the difference between the Self and the Other could be more productive than premature interpretation, inaccurate representation, and homogenization. On the other hand, celebrating the concept of cultural specificity maintains a rigid stratification of the world, while desires and attempts to understand and preserve distinct cultures might very well endanger and violate their integrity (Chow 339). In fact, one of the founding premises of Orientalism is that the Occident is clearly definable through shared Christian-humanist traditions, democratic legal frameworks, and precisely demarcated borders that include Europe and North America (Sarasin 34), while the East remains a nebulous concept representing an amorphous geographical designation and numerous contradictions between “Ruhe–Unruhe, Leidenschaft–Apathie, Phantasie–Metaphysik, Symbolik–Buchstäblichkeit, Marktlärm–Schweigen der Wüste, Materialismus–Idealismus, Sinnlichkeit–fanatischer Wahn, Pracht–Elend” (Rapp 31). In this sense, accepting the inhuman status of the spectres and maintaining their inscrutability may allow one to deconstruct pre-existing physical and symbolic borders and challenge the epistemological foundations of humans who come into contact with ghosts. At the same time, however, without engaging in deeper interactions with ghosts, deciphering their intentions, and understanding the cultures they represent, one runs the risk of lingering on the level of cursory encounters that still relegate the spectre as a temporarily engaging but ultimately insignificant object ready to be disposed of or departed from.

Indeed, a full acceptance of the spectres’ epistemological differences and opacity inherently conflicts with the urge to bridge the gap between Germany and the East Asian culture that the ghosts represent. This tension is fully evident at the end of *Ghosted* when the spirits of Mei-li and Ai-ling smile at Sophie during the memorial ceremony before departing for the underworld. While Mei-li previously appears in a concrete, human-like body visible to everyone, here she is visible only to the German protagonist. She therefore no longer exists as Sophie’s equal and romantic interest but as an inhuman Other whose desires—first to know the truth behind the death of her human counterpart and now to accept Sophie’s gesture of reconciliation—must be fulfilled for Sophie to be left alone. It is at this highly culturally specific site of traditional Taiwanese religious ceremony, an occasion highlighted by the camera’s panning shot of a table replete with incense, paper money, and food for sacrifice, that the rogue power of the ghost disappears. By ending the film on this note, Treut allows Sophie to achieve a higher level of spiritual connection with the East Asian women, but this attempt at practising the culture of the Other immediately domesticates the most fascinating aspect of the ghost, whose opacity once gave her the power to disregard, unsettle, and “queer” any defined rules of representation.

Faced with the dilemma to make Taiwanese culture legible to Western audiences while maintaining distance from the Other to respect its uniqueness, Treut resorts to constructing an apparitional figure so cognizant of the dynamics of cross-cultural encounters that the specter could temporarily turn the cinematic apparatus back on itself. But, ultimately, the ghost's dangerous, radical powers must be put in check for the film's Western viewers to reach a moment of repose. As such, Treut does not fully depart from German cinema's Orientalist traditions but merely establishes an *aimei* relationship with the Taiwanese Other, a relationship perhaps more intimate than a mere perfunctory encounter but less than a far-reaching, profound connection between East and West.

Conclusion

As the first narrative feature co-produced by Germany and Taiwan, *Ghosted* addresses German cinema's previous negligence of queer Asian subjects by connecting a portrayal of transnational cultural exchanges with reflections on meta-cinematic discourses and ghostly femininity. Specifically, the spectral figure Mei-li "queers" the screen apparatus through breaking the existing boundaries of the orientalizing, objectifying grid. Whereas the screen constrains Ai-ling's personhood, the highly volatile and dynamic ghost readily slips in and out of the screen, existing sometimes within, sometimes outside of, its parameter of influence. While her real-world double, Ai-ling, passively submits to the gaze of the white German filmmaker, the ghost possesses a double consciousness of her alienation and thus challenges the domesticating effect of the racially charged look by directly confronting it. Further queering established rules of narrative progression and spatial continuity in mainstream cinema, the ghost becomes an enigmatic existence beyond full interpretation. The epistemological value of the apparitional non-human lies precisely in its ability to deconstruct the omnipresence of the medial interface that constantly exerts influence on our visual and cultural field, as well as ordinary conceptions of temporality, spatiality, and reality. However, to bridge the gap between German and East Asian cultures, the ghost's dangerous and radical power must be contained; indeed, Treut domesticates the ghost's unfathomable nature in pursuit of a relationship with the Other that exceeds the level of brief encounters but does not yet amount to a deeper, more sophisticated connection that breaks free from the stereotypical framework of Orientalism. This phenomenon raises important questions for studies of queer inhumanisms, postcolonial studies, and transnational cinema: in the case where a complete understanding of the Other is inconceivable, to what extent should areas of opacity be maintained, and in what ways can interpretation be feasible and productive?

In a recent article, Rob Stone and Luis Freijo survey film scholars' diverse approaches to deconstructing Eurocentrism and conclude that scholars waver between the pessimism of perceiving world cinema as unknowable—that is, inherently precluding interpretations by anglophone critics who have not

engaged with a foreign culture through prolonged immersion—and the optimism of contending that world cinema is only “as yet unknown,” in the sense that it defers immediate conclusions, only to call for a persistent, continuous, and full unravelling at a later time (3). Deferring to the latter, Stone and Freijo argue that even when critics might lack enough knowledge to fully discern the meaning of a given foreign film, “the search for the knowledge that ‘unlocks’ a film to which we are ‘the other’ has at least begun” (8). While conventional approaches to overcoming the unknowability of world cinema include either an intensive study of foreign cultures through immersion, language acquisition, and comprehensive overview or a more limited, selective viewing that relies on Western festivals and streaming platforms, there might be a third way: “that is[,] looking for and ‘feeling into’ [*empfinden*] the impurities in Western cinema that constitute trace evidence of new paradigms happening elsewhere” (12). Keys to this third way of *Einfühlung* include both an empathy for the Other despite differences and an openness to impurity, contamination, and cross-referencing where the “trace” of the foreign is accepted into and imbricated within the sphere of one’s own (Stone and Freijo 9). The site of this hybridity, I argue, may be located in the notion of the screen.

In the age of a global coronavirus pandemic, as people spend a significant amount of time on phones, laptops, television, video conferences, and online streaming platforms, these powerful interfaces have influenced and will continue to influence the outcome of each encounter that takes place by their sides. If a radical escape from the screen is out of the question, it might be productive to change current perceptions of the screen as a constraining platform whose clearly demarcated borders must be transcended. Instead, using virtual meeting platforms as a metaphor, one could view the screen as a designated contact zone where partners at either end must collaborate to foster a mutual conversation on equal terms. Just as physical intrusions, ambient sounds, and technical glitches are frequent occurrences during an online meeting, one could cope with unintentionality, speechlessness, and disconnection as they arise, without trying to see through the screen and capture the entire picture on the other side but waiting for a gradual unfolding of close connections over a course of continuous engagement. Rather than focusing solely on who has the power to represent and to direct the gaze, one can instead envision oneself by way of the inhuman/foreign/queer Other, seeing oneself inflected, reflected, and in fact embedded in the Other. This metaphor, I believe, is the key to a more dynamic future of transnational and transcultural engagements.

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Notes

- 1 The use of the metaphor of “screen as mirror” is particularly apt in the portrayal of Chinese lesbianism, since in Chinese etymology, the phrase *mojing* (磨鏡, literally “rubbing the mirror”) specifically refers to the sexual act of rubbing each other’s bodies among lesbian couples (Chen, “Queering” 245). Therefore, it is not a coincidence that one of the most recent mainland Chinese television shows to feature lesbian love among its protagonists is titled *Couple of Mirrors* (*Shuangjing* 雙鏡, literally “double mirror,” directed by Dachao Li, 2021).
- 2 While the negation of queer personhood in the Global North has its roots in the religious doctrines of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, Taiwanese religious beliefs and practices are more syncretic (Cheng 2), drawing from such diverse sources as Zen, Theravada, Mahayana, and Tibetan Buddhism; Daoism; and folk religion. Recent studies indicate that Buddhism is more “open,” “tolerant,” and “at least ambivalent” toward homosexuality than the Judeo-Christian tradition (Suen and Chan 1037; C. Lee and Han 69), although such a tolerance is often based on a non-disclosure of one’s sexual identity (Suen and Chan 1041). Regarding all sexual desire as a form of greed and consequently a cause of suffering, Buddhism in fact preaches the abjuration of desire as the rightful path to enlightenment and thus understands gender and sexual orientation only as a “subsidiary issue” (Suen and Chan 1037). Arnika Fuhrmann asserts that Buddhism-inflected formulations of the ontology of queer personhood and femininity inherently pertain to “the futility of attachment” (4), whereby “the notion of existence is marked by impermanence and desire is always already destined to fail” (2). Nevertheless, by evoking the ungraspable, unattainable figure of the ghost who has the power to transcend temporal and ontological borders of life and death, contemporary queer cinema seeks to parse problematical of desire while probing the agency of minoritized women and queer persons (Fuhrmann 5).

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