

Phantoms of Benevolence

A text by **Olivier Marboeuf** · December 2020

SANCTUARY

A moonless night has fallen there. If trees could feel, they would feel humid and fresh or hot and sticky, with a sap so intensely black you couldn't see your feet. But there is no tree, no surviving plant that can bear witness, the savage was burned methodically and what little air there is, is void of insects. Not even a fly to buzz over the site and draw a labyrinth on the thousand facets of its eye. Not even an earthworm to look on with all its rings, a magnificent network of underworlds.

He enters and opens his mouth wide. Is it a yawn? Is it a smile? He is naked. His skin is a uniform yellow, he has a fever. His head and stomach are conflated in a golden circle. He cannot sleep or is submerged in a phosphorescent nightmare, either or. Although it is night, he is hungry. He does not know satiety. He chews wads of gum in dark corridors. With nonchalance he swallows. He devours the acid harvests of a field – someone thinks: like those candies that created volcanic eruptions in our childish mouths. He digs in the bowels of a mine. A mine or a field. Gold, cobalt, sugar cane or

maybe coca leaves or maybe something else, those magic stones, embedded in all the tales of the New World, stones that beg to be picked up. And if they had arms, they would open those arms to us in welcome, and we would cut off their hands before kissing them and hugging them close to our hearts. Gold, cobalt, sugar cane or maybe coca leaves or maybe other things that people kill for, pillage and rape for, things for which a zombie humanity avidly digs and opens their large crazy eyes, inspired one last time before fainting in the mud. And what we think is quicksand has the taste of the powder of thousands of bones mixed with excrement. And what we take for a landscape is a pile of decomposing bodies. The (primary) matter of deaths accumulates and erects the mud walls of a labyrinth. A field, a mine, or perhaps a sanctuary.

He enters and opens his mouth wide. Always the same ritual to begin a story that has no end. When a place is totally depleted of its resources, a field, a mine, a sanctuary, another place appears, another labyrinth. And the only problem with all this is the phantoms, the phantoms of these places. No one knows what they're doing there, if they're protecting

this dark world and if they protect this primary matter they've extracted, for which they gave their lives, their muscles and bones and sweat, before they became phantoms. No one knows if they are slaves, cleaning ladies, landless farmers, labourers, undocumented workers who built labyrinths with their own flesh, thrown onto a structure of human bones. We will never know the phantoms' point of view in this story; the eye, the hand and the mouth of indigenous beings in this labyrinth, the Creoles of this un-peopled night, so desperately black, uninhabitable and with no scent. We will never know what was there before and if the air was breathable. There could have been a phantom woman and her name would have been Pinky. Proud and agile, provocative. But she could also be named Solitude and her eyes would have two colours because she would be the phantom of several women. And Pinky-Solitude could say something in a language we don't recognize, yet vaguely understand. "I'm going to shut your big mouth" would be the closest translation. And then she would come out of a wall without warning, like a dripping substance, like a creature emerging from a secret passage into a bourgeois kitchen and only the gluttonous child would see her. While he's opening the fridge in the middle of another night, air-conditioned and under control, bathed in a filtered black light pierced by the blinking eyes of domestic machines. She shouldn't be there, this phantom creature. She is dirty and she smells. She has come back from a world that doesn't exist, with an odour and a face covered with shit. An instant of terror and disturbance will shake the entire family. A trembling.

Phantoms are merely the negative lives of the one who opens his mouth wide and swallows, devours and empties. We do not know if it's a sanctuary and if all these wads of gum are existences or traces of sacred existences

the phantoms watch over, trembling – it could also be cherries, apples, oranges, melons, keys, bells, nuggets of gold and diamonds with pale pink reflections and also undigested pellets regurgitated by owls, even if the presence of birds in this airless night is most uncertain. A sanctuary or a field, a ruin, a forest where everything speaks, a palace that emerges from mud, a precipitate of human hopes and despairs. What is certain is that no contact is possible. If by misfortune the phantoms touch *the one who is happy only when he eats* – this is what they have named him or would name him if naming had any importance for the phantoms – then he loses a life. With each contact, he dies a little bit, until he is completely dead. For he can only die from this contact with the skin of phantoms. He cannot die for example from eating too much or even from eating something he shouldn't have eaten, because the phantoms could be the masters and mistresses of poison. But, in fact, they are not. It's the contact that kills, for *the one who eats and smiles at the same time* cannot become a phantom, cannot be any other form of presence than that of a hungry star that rules forever at the centre of this night. A heatless fire, with a joy both communicative and monstrous. He loves himself, without a doubt. And he has love to give, but not here, somewhere else. Not in this underground parking lot, in this cave, this ship's hold where phantoms moan. Or perhaps they would moan if we could hear them, but this is a scene where all the witnesses have apparently been devoured. What remains are the phantoms who are the last existences to perturb this feast. And our sun must avoid crossing their path, even as it continues to eat.

But one day a different gumball appears that is magic – it creates a delicious explosion on his palate, sending a thrilling shiver to his cheeks and deep into his skull, for he too was once a child. When he eats it, he can, for a brief

moment, also eat the four phantoms who haunt the place, in four different ways – and there are a thousand ways to haunt places just as there are a thousand ways to become the dirt walls of a palace that slowly emerges from the mud of massacres. When he swallows this sorcerer's ball, the phantoms change their matter. They are no longer toxic. They take on a sweet and sugary consistency. Even in their lives as phantoms, they remain edible matters and matters of spectacle. Everything here is edible and even those who disappeared and those who have been made to disappear into primary matter, in the walls and the hold of the place, participate against their ghostly will in this smiling and happy orgy. And when the place is finally cleared of all its phantoms, of everything that haunts the night, when everything has been consumed and even the ghosts are exhausted, the place becomes habitable. It becomes safe. It becomes a place in the present. Absolutely.

PHANTOM DIASPORAS

The father arrives in the country. The mother arrives in the country. The entire family arrives in a country that is spread out everywhere on the oceans and in the forests, that scours the night clean of bad beliefs. It's the big country. The father says try not to get noticed, the mother worries they might bother people. In this way they grow up in this desire of nonexistence. They become Phantom Matter. And Phantom Matter penetrates into the gold(s) of the Republic – gold(s), coffee plants, sugar cane, coca leaves, or balls of magic gum, gems worth damning oneself for. Phantom Matter learns how to mimic lives other than her own. She embeds herself in the walls, in fabrics, in objects both old and new, in electric streams, in conduits where shit and acid meet. Phantom Matter silently breathes, in shame at the odour of her breath and the sound of her breath. She is careful that nothing

seeps out of her body. She speaks softly. Invisible now, perfectly smooth. She acts as a reassuring mirror, with a dazzling smile. The law is imprinted on her. Within her, the secret conditions of the welcoming, benevolent place. She listens, she sees, and also she cleans, far from any prying eyes. She must always feel more, express less and dig deep inside herself. She accumulates a knowledge of the geology of her bones, the suppleness of her flesh. She registers all the states of death and all the chemistries of night. She is the mud that you use to create bricks for the most splendid palaces, the most delicate sex toys.

But one day she spills over. First a laugh comes from nowhere – from behind a wall, a cave, a region beyond the grave – a grating voice from the dark eye of a tree, a fart, a bad word said in contraband French. She makes herself heard. She makes herself felt and the laugh announces her arrival, her politics. Because she cannot come on stage with the noise and odour of the ship's hold, she cannot appear without the archive accumulated within her suddenly discharging, an indecipherable bazaar, an indecent spectacle. She cannot present herself without disturbing things, overturning the table, without making herself noticed. When she emerges from her night, when she exudes from a democratic décor, when she drips onto a citizens' floor, Phantom Matter upsets the arrangement of the benevolent scene. At the centre of the room she exhibits a face in which no one can see themselves. She says what shouldn't be said. A too talkative and incandescent matter that hides in the pillars and fluids of the friendly world. She explodes on screen, she un-invites the invitation she receives, returns it and transforms it into fire. She imposes her cinema, her phantom scene. Uncontrollable and savant matter, she makes a comeback regardless of any law. She left respectability to those who preceded her and those for whom dancing on the bridge of a ship on fire is more desirable than descending into the hold – the hold she turned into her secret world and her place of knife-like knowledge, the

sound studio where she cobbled her voice together with old synthesizers. She reprises the History of France to a heavy beat of House music, she sings into the vocoder with her asthmatic breath. And then all the docile and domestic objects stand to attention. They get hard-ons. A river of mud covers the assembly. And henceforth we will have to speak with this putrid and fertile swamp. We will have to speak in and with the presence of the ghostly scene that demands attention and is not a scene that you would convoke, that you would invite.

AT THE PALACE

At the palace, all that escapes is brought back. All the lives, all the dead, all the poetry, all the fates and protections, all the magic and epidermises that yesterday seemed criminal, all the sexualities judged to be twisted, all the undesirable phantoms, all those who couldn't breathe in a night without air, all those who couldn't speak... are dragged back by the collar. And so benevolence is brought back. There it is, exposed in the masters' windows, joyously brandished by the management of what we now call late capitalism – which is a night of labyrinths that never ends. And if the master winds up crying, and if the queen mopes about, all the subjects must be invited to the ceremony to participate in the tragic performance of the end of the world. And all must begin with this end, with this History. People come to hear them unpack their shame and unconditional love – and also their revolt. It creates a noise that in all circumstances overrides the other voices and other ends. There isn't a single moment when this Body isn't speaking. And today it yells out benevolence like the sound of a metallic hand caressing all the heads, even the heads that have been cut off, even the heads that aren't there, even the heads that have been removed from bodies to be exhibited elsewhere, even the heads snatched from our enemies of yesterday to become artworks today.

Phantom Matter is now oozing from all the walls. A continuous gurgling that, if you pay attention, says in a deformed and cacophonous French something that goes a bit like this:

Benevolence is not an image, not a moral inclination, and it cannot be convoked; it is rather a climate, it is gestures and presences, matters from which something emerges that comes from no one and belongs to no one. Benevolence can be there and then become lost. She can be pronounced like a lie at the expense of those who suffer in the shadows of the benevolent scene. At this point we must pay attention. Another thing: we cannot make claims for benevolence, shout about benevolence – from a toxic place. Benevolence does not repair the toxic place and if she makes it bearable – and if she makes bearable and opaque all the forms of privilege and opportunism – then she must be treated with all the mistrust and hate that she deserves, she must be held accountable. She must also say who she evicts to create her space. And if it is possible, resist her loving projection. For Benevolence can seem comfortable if you live amid security, but she is a challenge for all those who live in the anguish of an airless night, in the precariousness of devastated fields and the fear of being devoured by large smiles. For these people, Benevolence is a political sky, a fresh hand, an air that one breathes that costs nothing, produces no debt, and not a posture, an ethic of privilege. She has nothing to do with innocence, the desire to not know, nor does she have anything to do with security and comfort, for we must learn to speak with those who have never had peace, truly, who have always been the dark and repulsive matter against whom we fabricate the illusory security and comfort of places. Benevolence is always the condition of the deepest critique, the most necessary debate, and the greatest care for the place, for what is seen there and could not be seen, for that which is not yet presenting itself, but will present itself one day with fanfare. Taking care of a place means emerging from the narcissistic trap of care, it's

taking care of those who live and create the place as a consequence of care given to the place itself. And this is not taking care of those people in lieu of care given to the place. It is not abandoning the place-that-is-not-self for a place-that-must-become-self. On the contrary, it is taking care of the place explicitly because it is not self, and because it cannot become self, and because it resists. Nor is it hiding the place underneath a benevolent surface and discourse. For Benevolence is not a gas or an image. She is the echo and the residue of visible and invisible matters in which she makes herself felt.

This is how Phantom Matter speaks to take her place, to affirm her presence, which disturbs and stinks:

Benevolence will disappear as soon as we will have finished taking care of the same place, from the point where we find ourselves, either because we will have each created our "small space", our "place-for-self", or because some of us will have refused give the place all the attention it needed. And then the climate will become unbreathable.

After a moment, while Phantom Matter is now spewing like a geyser in the middle of the room and it's becoming impossible not to hear her liquid rumbling:

We'll have to find another name for the new management that invests in narcissistic needs. For Benevolence knows exactly where we are, and she knows all the categories of violence sedimented in walls and bodies to produce the place where we are. She knows what cannot be said, what is forbidden and kept in the secret of the ship's hold, in the cave, which is perhaps a field, a mine, a palace made of human mud. Benevolence is critical desire and desire for knowledge, desire to pierce the surface and observe the toxic economies that support the benevolent staging. She appears without a model, for we all act together based

on our incorporated history of violence, what we think is right, what we feel as danger. And also the different ways by which we live the cost of production of an "Us", cleaned of any shadow or phantom. For those who live lives considered to be criminal, Benevolence is the possibility of living these lives and that they be good lives, feeling that another path exists leading toward this place that slowly rises up and that is not traced out in a night without air and without being, by priests who devour jungles in order to inhabit the world. A path that escapes the eye and the mouth, which noisily and ceaselessly occupy the heart of places. An eye and a mouth incapable of realizing their true privileges, which always point toward another thing, another direction, and create diversions around their presence to make it violently natural and indispensable.

Phantom Matter holds her skull and ends by spewing out a final jet in which sap, petroleum and sexual secretions are mingled:

Our heads hurt from all this baying at benevolence. Therefore, if we could speak quietly and calmly now, without making noise, and rest for a moment and not be obliged to react, not be obliged to respond, not be obliged to repeat the benevolent fables and masses, not be obliged to be saved, take a breath, and no longer obey a millionth training of our bodies in the direction of lives that are not our own, if we could do this, if we could no longer live under the eye that makes us dangerous, but without necessarily disarming ourselves, without having to lay down our muscles which are weapons because of the lives we live, without having to make of our bones the props and supports of this palace, and of our sweat its performance, without having to bend and consent, without having to remain in places where this body that occupies the centre of the stage covers us with a blanket of benevolence that suffocates us like the knee of a police officer suffocates us, by moving a bit, just a tiny bit, a modest bit on

the scale of our forces, if we could slide down the walls and into the reeking corridors of the benevolent scene where cleaning ladies are working, and then advance toward dawn until the voice of benevolence becomes a bit softer, maybe we could call the fresh air we would then be breathing, just for an instant, Benevolence.

PHANTOM NOTES

+ *Pac-Man* (パックマン, Pakkuman) is a video game created by Toru Iwatani for the Japanese company Namco, first released in Japan in May 1980.

+ *Parasite* is a South Korean film directed by Bong Joon Ho (2019). It received the Palme d'Or at the 2019 Cannes Festival (France) and was named Best Picture at the 2020 Oscars (United States).

+ Malcom Ferdinand, *Une écologie décoloniale* (Paris, Editions du Seuil, 2019)

+ Isabelle Stengers and Philippe Pignarre, *Capitalist Sorcery: Breaking the Spell*, trans. Andrew Goffey (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015)

+ Norman Ajari, *La dignité ou la mort. Ethique et politique de la race* (Paris, La Découverte, 2019), p. 56

+ Judith Butler, "Can one lead a good life in a bad life?" Adorno Prize Lecture, *Radical Philosophy* 176 (Nov/Dec 2012), <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/can-one-lead-a-good-life-in-a-bad-life>

Phantom of Benevolence is a text that prolongs a conversation about a desirable place for art with Julien Duc-Maugé, director of the art centre Synesthésie Mmaintenant at Saint-Denis (France)

www.mmaintenant.org

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