

SPECTERS OF DEFIANCE
SAMUEL LUTERBACHER

The ghost may be the only hero left in our time. In narrative, the figure of the ghost announces the return of something past into the present, often as a prophetic warning of things to come. But such ancient forms never seem to travel gently into the here and now: the spectral irrupts suddenly, like the flash of a repressed and faded memory that disturbs the linearity of future, present and past.¹

'Spectral' can certainly describe our first impression of Mathis Gasser's *Heroes and Ghosts*, a series of figurative paintings in oil on medium-grade linen, ongoing since 2007. In each, a figure stands front-on, eerily still and sometimes menacing, in the center of the visual field. Gasser's figures are taken from a wide range of media ranging from the popular to the esoteric: they hail from high-budget Hollywood films, pulp horror and science fiction, comics, Japanese manga, and works of art. We might recognize a certain figure from a movie or a book cover, but the artist's painting removes the image from its original printed, photographic or digital source. It is precisely these images' collective power that draws Gasser to carefully select and paint them, allowing these characters to momentarily haunt the space of the art gallery. However, Gasser's appropriations go beyond a generic mixing of 'high' and 'low' culture. His paintings resemble a gesture of collecting that is almost anthropological in nature: *Heroes and Ghosts* decontextualizes and reframes each visual character in an attempt to capture the force they have over our imagination. For Gasser, fictional characters are apparitions that populate collective memory and manifest across a wide range of media. They embody the past forms and narratives which are constantly reformulated by fiction in contemporary culture, spurred by increased demand in new digital realms.

Gasser describes the title *Heroes and Ghosts* as somewhat ironic. Many of the figures portrayed in the series are ambiguous and often violent fictional characters who lack the traditional hero's ideological stability. Gasser's series draws its title from an exhibition catalogue (Fig. 1) on the late Edo-period Japanese artist Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1798–1861), a master woodblock printer long honored for his contributions to the development of the Japanese graphic form. Kuniyoshi devised brilliant new technologies to radically reinvent the ghosts, demons and monsters of past traditional legends and folkloric visual culture. He mobilized print's reproductive capability to serve an emergent literate urban culture that was fascinated by the grotesque and the supernatural, and



Fig. 1: Cover of Robert Schaap, *Heroes & Ghosts: Japanese Prints by Kuniyoshi 1797-1861*, (Amsterdam: Hotei Publishing, 1998).



Fig. 2: Mathis Gasser, *Inhabitants (After DirkLoechel)*, 2017, oil on canvas, 270 × 200 cm. Credit Suisse Collection.

hungry for ever-more complex stories and bizarre images. Kuniyoshi's characters became a lens for viewing and critiquing a society poised to topple into the modern era. In his study of fantasy in modern Japan, Gerald Figal describes how the supernatural genre became a way of 'experimenting with alternative forms of being and knowing' in a society that was experiencing rapid social and technological transformation.² The fantastic offered a means of reflecting on such temporal disruptions through the model of alterity. Modernity saw drastic changes in how societies could conceive of history and progress; such genres have indeed persisted and proliferated as critical media for examining contemporary crises since the Industrial Revolution. Gasser's nod to Kuniyoshi recalls how the Japanese artist's work presaged the dominance of science fiction and fantasy in our current epoch.

Gasser's series also bears the influence of the Austrian writer Robert Musil's unfinished existentialist novel *The Man without Qualities*. Set in early twentieth-century

Vienna, Musil's monumental work is haunted by the character of Christian Moosbrugger, a working-class man accused of murdering a prostitute. Moosbrugger appears as an object of fascination and reflection for the Viennese society that has put him on trial. Throughout the text, Moosbrugger evades every order of knowledge imposed by the state, breaking the conventions of modern life that seek to govern him. Moosbrugger is an entity seemingly outside the world he inhabits, yet simultaneously a product of it, as the text makes clear: 'if mankind could dream as a whole, that dream would be Moosbrugger'.³ The character represents an emanation of disorder from the imagination of a seemingly disciplined society, serving as a conduit for exploring the novel's ethical and social dimensions. Through Moosbrugger, Musil ponders on the role of narrative fiction as a reflection and critique of modern society.⁴ Gasser displays a fascination with the presence of the spectral, the creaturely, and other harbingers of chaos at the advent of modernity. His own series ponders the strong presence of fictional characters from the very emergence of nation-states to current neoliberal, globalized environments.

Gasser might describe *Heroes and Ghosts* as a 'personal collection of characters', but he remains aware of how his own inclination to paint parallels a larger social phenomenon of collecting and archiving articles of fiction. For example, his 2017 large-scale painting *Inhabitants (After DirkLoechel)* (Fig. 2) featured a collection of different starships from science fiction, itself reproduced after a digital image shared among members of the online forum *DeviantArt*. What interests Gasser is not only a community's drive to amass these pictures of starships, but also these fictional entities' transhistorical position within the collective imaginary: they recall both the vessels of past European maritime expansion and the potential future of space colonization. *Heroes and Ghosts* constitutes yet another sort of laboratory for images, regarding the impact of fictional entities on social memory and their recurrence through time.

Gasser cites the work of the German art historian Aby Warburg in conceiving his own assemblage of characters. Warburg saw images and symbols as a sort of recurrent 'symptom' throughout human history, albeit of a different nature.⁵ For Warburg, images and symbols became carriers for antique gestures and figures of 'pathos' through time, aptly dubbed 'pathos-formulae', corresponding to symbols of heightened emotion. They project the multiple and opposing dynamic energies that traverse time and reveal themselves in recurrent images. Warburg's final project, the *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*, was an immense archival study, or 'image atlas', of symbolic memory, composed of photographs ranging from antique sculpture to Renaissance painting to contemporary advertisements, all arranged against black felt panels. No doubt, *Heroes and Ghosts* also constitutes a sort of *Bilderatlas* devoted to the fictional character.

The atlas, as Matthew Vollgraaf argues, functions by analogy between images rather than semantics, constantly delivering new meanings by way of arrangement and juxtaposition.⁶ This practice can reveal how images operate via their own language and temporality to 'point ahead as well as back in time'.⁷ Indeed, Warburg's practice foresaw what has now become part of our daily visual landscape with the development of digital archives and online image searches. Our current familiarity with image banks can perhaps obscure the persistently 'spectral' nature of pictorial collections (Warburg famously referred to his as 'a ghost story for adults'): images filled with repressed memories, gestures from the past that seem to re-emerge again and again. Phantoms inhabit and embody Warburg's temporally disjunctive history of images. In fact, the character of the Nymph, which for Warburg personified the recurrence of antique gestures, haunted his intellectual project. Plate 46 of the *Bilderatlas* (Fig. 3) captures the Nymph's migration across different collected images. She morphs from a fruit-bearing servant in Domenico Ghirlandaio's famous Renaissance fresco to an Italian farmer in a contemporary photograph. Through decontextualization and assemblage, the atlas transforms the image, allowing it to reveal patterns that could not be seen before. Thus, from its inception to today, the image atlas has served, by breaking traditional views of time and place to uncover the eternal return of past forces in our present, as a kind of visual seismograph for human history.



Fig. 3: Plate 46 of Aby Warburg, *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*, 1924–1929.

More than a mere aesthetic experiment, Warburg's atlas is closely intertwined with a notion of historical crisis. Images expose civilization's antagonistic forces, ancient superstitions, rapid technologization and past traumas. With new information technologies, the concept of the atlas has, since Warburg, come to encompass an ever-expanding visual spectrum. The act of collecting images is never a neutral or ahistorical act. Warburg's study promoted transhistorical and universalizing claims that should be approached with a critical lens today. For example, his comparative studies of indigenous rituals in New Mexico cannot be isolated from the American colonial project in the Southwest. Our own current over-exposure to new forms of mass and digital media can attach a similarly false sense of freedom to new globalized systems, which seek to exploit and control the never-ending flux of visual information.

This phantasmic analogical engine drives *Heroes and Ghosts*. Gasser's series equates to a kind of *Bilderatlas* in which the canvas serves as the space for the artist's collection of characters. However, unlike the Warburgian atlas, Gasser's project does not search for commonality of form or transhistorical 'gestures' in images; rather, it explores the role of fictional characters as an active force within our visual culture. Gasser removes characters from their own narrative arcs to re-paint them as decontextualized standalone figures. In addition, Gasser combines figures drawn from non-narrative forms, such as 'high art' paintings, with those found in contemporary movies, comics, and video games, creating analogies between different fictional worlds and blurring the distinctions of what constitutes a visual 'character'. For example, in Gasser's copy of Kazimir Malevich's painting *Carpenter* (Fig. 4), the apron-clad, tool-bearing carpenter can suddenly shift



Fig. 4: Mathis Gasser, *Carpenter (After Kazimir Malevich)*, 2010–2011, oil on canvas, 44 × 30cm.



Fig. 5: Mathis Gasser, *Anton Chigurh*, 2010–2011, oil on canvas, 44 × 30cm.

into a sinister figure reminiscent of the thriller genre, akin to Gasser's painting of Anton Chigurh (Fig. 5), the villainous hitman from the Coen brothers' cinematic adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's novel *No Country for Old Men*. Chigurh is a ghostly figure who traverses the entire film, cattle prod in hand, seemingly appearing from and vanishing into nowhere as a specter of the timeless violence that shapes the narrative's arc.

Images in Gasser's work can also act as the aggregators of various social tensions. His collages consist of photographs that draw from a range of sources, from archaic symbols to high-tech fantasies. The characters from *Heroes and Ghosts* often correspond to the anxieties and fears within contemporary liberal democracies. These characters emanate from, and circulate within, the creative spaces found in these now-globalized political systems. They represent the forces of active violence and potential chaos that shift the sands upon which liberal democratic institutions are built. They thus embody a kind of cultural management of tensions, revolt and insurgency in such societies.

The series speaks precisely to the intimate relationship that publics may develop with fictional characters, even when these characters are distributed through mass-media channels. Gasser's careful selection of idiosyncratic characters and re-painting of each figure captures the interplay between individual and collective responses to fictional entities. Gasser considers the figures of *Heroes and Ghosts* as 'global citizens' in the sense that fictional characters now inhabit a worldwide space, yet come to carry different meanings for the various communities and individuals who adopt them. These characters constitute a gathering site for collective desires and fears, sometimes becoming a visual banner for a general call to 'action' within our societies.

For Gasser, painting entails a slower and less exact process of replication than traditional forms of mechanical reproduction. As the critic John Berger has claimed, photography creates a sense of immediacy because it 'stops time', while the power of painting lies in its ability to 'encompass time'.⁸ A painting consists of a multiplicity of images, various experiences of looking layered on top of each other over time. For Gasser, the temporal process of painting parallels the way in which a fictional being lingers in the mind, in such a way that his paintings 'connect to a vague memory of the character'.⁹ There is something personal in *Heroes and Ghosts*: Gasser alone decides when the image is completed



Fig. 6: Detail of Francis Alÿs, *Fabiola*, installation view, Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), Los Angeles, 2008–2009.

or when it bears satisfactory resemblance to its source. Thus, the series displays an extraordinary range of styles and degrees of finish. Each image responds to the medium of its prototype. The handmade painted quality points to examples from ‘folk’ and ‘fan-based’ art that suggest a popular and more collective rendering of these fictional characters.

In the way in which *Heroes and Ghosts* asks us to consider how images mediate between spheres of individual and communal expression, it parallels the Belgian artist Francis Alÿs’s 2007 project *Fabiola*, which featured his personal collection of painted portraits of the fourth-century Roman saint (Fig. 6). Each painting in Alÿs’s collection is modeled after the same imaginary portrait – now lost – painted by the nineteenth-century French artist Jean-Jacques Henner. Alÿs gathers an array of professional and amateur renditions of the same prototype, whose juxtaposition exposes slight variations or similarities between images, with uncanny results. Alÿs’s interest lies also in the ghostly effects of the image of the saint: the hundreds of painted copies transform into apparitions of a lost prototype. As David Morgan states, *Fabiola* ‘floats among the many different versions as the elusive model that binds them together but is never fully, finally present in any one’.¹⁰ Alÿs’s project uncovers the power of the original painting as a kind of archetypal image which continually shapes the character of *Fabiola* in the collective memory. Traditional icon painting attempts to maintain resemblance through the transmission of ancient types from one copyist’s hand to the next. Icon painting closely resembles the visual memory’s struggle to retrieve what is past and balance it with the constant interjection of the present. The icon ‘encompasses time’ because it is the result of many copies transferred among painters from one epoch to the next. Each icon constitutes a collection of images built up over time and distilled into a single figure.

Heroes and Ghosts tends towards the ‘iconic’. However, it should be understood less in the direct sense of an affiliation with religious painting, and more as a pictorial form or mode. The central and static pose of each figure in Gasser’s painted series alludes to archaic forms of image-making, just as the depicted characters themselves point to past narrative and archetypal structures. The visual stillness of each image, and its slow, manual process of creation, contrasts sharply with the ever-accelerating pace with which new fictional characters come into being and circulate through digital media and online

platforms. Their appearance in this alternate and archaic realm of the painted canvas elicits an uncanny feeling of *déjà-vu*. Each canvas can act as a carrier for multiple visual manifestations and traces of a character. The result is an approximation to the character and its recognition by the public. Gasser often depicts his figures with blurred contours, like emanations in a dream-like state. Indeed, *Heroes and Ghosts*’ iconicity bears a spectral quality: none of its characters can ever be subsumed into a fixed image, they exist instead in varying states of being for the communities who encounter them.

Iconic stillness does not reduce the image to a state of submission, but rather orients it towards alternative forms of resistance. In his study of the Second World War-era horror movies of the American horror film producer Val Lewton, the art historian Alexander Nemerov has brilliantly examined the power of stillness that permeates its characters. He draws attention to the frozen, ghostly figures that appear in Lewton’s films, at once at odds with the temporality of the film and essential to its composition.¹¹ These figures offer moments of stillness which interrupt the rhythmic progression of the cinematic story-line, creating a kind of iconic image that suspends the movie’s narrative. Nemerov aptly calls such characters ‘icons of grief’, because they embody the collective trauma and violence of 1940s America. His analysis of *Carrefour*, the Black zombie character in Lewton’s 1943 production *I Walked with a Zombie*, reveals the protagonist to be a tragic figure, an emblem of a white supremacist government against its African-American citizens.¹² In a famous scene, *Carrefour* stands still in a field, his tall silhouette intersecting with the horizon. His frozen stance bears the weight of collective tragedy, yet nevertheless projects defiance rather than defeat in the face of history.

Indeed, the upright and motionless body manifests as a social sign of insubordination: it is to literally ‘stand for’ (or against) something, often in opposition to the status quo. The figures of *Heroes and Ghosts* face the viewer frontally in this defiant, static stance. Gasser captures many of the figures in arrest, often carrying a tool or weapon. The paintings *Mattie Ross* (Fig. 7) and *Asami Yamazaki* (Fig. 8) both render female characters in such an arrested moment. *Mattie Ross* draws from the cover of the first edition of the 1968 Western novel *True Grit* by Charles Portis. It shows the novel’s female protagonist, sporting pigtailed and a skirt, holding the reins of her horse in her left hand and clutching the barrel of a rifle in her right, all in a flattened and colorful manner reminiscent of nineteenth-century



Fig. 7: Mathis Gasser, *Mattie Ross*, 2010–2011, oil on canvas, 44 × 30cm.



Fig. 8: Mathis Gasser, *Asami Yamazaki*, 2012–2013, oil on canvas, 44 × 30cm.

American folk art. *Asami Yamazaki* renders a still from the 1999 Japanese horror movie *Audition*, directed by Takashi Miike. Gasser paints *Asami Yamazaki* in a more blurred photo-realist style, emphasizing chiaroscuro and showing the character slightly tipped over with her torso, neck and head bowed, her dark hair slightly veiling her face. She lifts a lightly painted syringe upward with her arm and hand. The instrument contrasts menacingly with the dark latex glove and the rest of her slumping body. In both paintings, the female figures momentarily stand still, and wield their respective implements of bodily transgression – gun and syringe – as though to imply the possibility of violence without explicitly perpetrating it. The characters' stasis seems to mark defiance towards the surrounding world. Their images suggest a *potential* action, whose outcome depends solely on the viewer's imagination.

The characters of *Mattie* and *Asami* thus embody a kind of disobedience. They transgress the innocence, subordination and passivity found in the traditional role of young women in Western and Japanese cinema. Both characters also possess a transmedial dimension, as they first originated novels that were later adapted into film. The rise of digital media has made the appearance of fictional characters in moving images ever-more ubiquitous. In *Heroes and Ghosts*, however, Gasser draws the character out from the flow of animated imagery let loose by contemporary platforms, distilling it into a moment of arrest in which the character's intentions remain unclear and ambiguous. Stasis opposes stagnation; it draws focus, and sets in motion the imaginary.

This powerful combination of stillness and defiance also emerges in the work of the photographer Allan Sekula, particularly in his series *Waiting for Tear Gas* (1999–2000), which captures protesters at rest during the 1999 'Battle of Seattle' against the World Trade Organization's Ministerial Conference.¹³ The image of the arrested figure in Sekula's body of work overtly participates in this visual vocabulary of resistance. *Waiting for Tear Gas* opposes the traditional photographic reportage of protest, which tends to focus on the violent clash between activists and authorities. Sekula often captures human figures in moments of stillness, caught between states of potential action that structure the contemporary capitalist structure of leisure and labor.¹⁴ He subverts the linear narrative of violent revolt exhibited in everyday journalistic media by presenting protesters in states of rest and wait, between moments of heightened action, making these captured intervals the main focus of the protest. One such photograph from the series shows a protester disguised as a red devil (Fig. 9). The man lifts a costume mask above his head with two hands. The shining, grinning devil mask partially covers the face of the real-life protester caught looking away from the camera, his face slightly turned and obscured. Sekula's photograph declines to indicate whether the protester has just removed the mask or is about to put it on, eschewing a clear sense of temporal narrative. Brandished aloft between the man's two hands, the devil mask takes on the form of a perfectly fixed and frontal image, suspended like a banner or icon in the pictorial field. Sekula's picture evokes Roland Barthes's description of the photographic pose and stasis as 'becoming a specter': the arrested figure removes himself partially from the world to be made an object of contemplation.¹⁵ The arrested body transforms into an image, but this spectral effect maintains nonetheless a political force of revolt by collapsing the order of time. It enacts the double nature of 'arrest': this action can mark physical subjugation to an authority (as in the term 'under arrest'), but is also the chief performance of resistance against it. Sekula opposes methods of traditional photographic portraiture that evince an identifiable subject with clear features; the photograph navigates between the devil character and its performer. It captures the protestor in a moment of revealing and concealing, where face and mask overlap one another. With its red flesh and horns, the image exhibits the devil as a transhistorical archetype of evil and subversion, but also as a character impersonated by the protestor whose visual form serves a singular historical instance of dissent.

For Musil, narrative writing must engage our sense of possibility. It offers a space for reflection not only upon how to think, but also upon how and when to act within contemporary society. In this respect, fiction often serves as a powerful source for imagining the realm of the possible and impossible. Genres of speculative fiction have been a powerful



Fig. 9: Allan Sekula, *Protester*, from *Waiting for Tear Gas*, 1999–2000, single-channel 35mm slide projection; Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo (MUAC), Mexico City, 2018.

source for imagining alternative forms of human existence since the late eighteenth century.¹⁶ For example, in the 1980 text *Une voie pour l'insubordination* ('A Path to Insubordination') by the Belgian poet and writer Henri Michaux, the supernatural serves as a radical possibility and resistance to a common order.¹⁷ The text recounts the story of a poltergeist, the emanation of a little girl whose domestic disturbances challenge the system of laws and rules that govern the adult household. As his title suggests, Michaux treats the fantastical, the spectral, and the demonic as a 'path', a transgressive set of behaviors and actions that subvert an imposed status quo.

Fictional characters exist as actants in a narrative system because their psychologies and actions drive a given plot. By displaying each character frontally and in a state of arrest, Gasser releases them from their respective stories. *Anton Chigurh*, *Mattie Ross* and *Asami Yamakazi* confront us, each bearing the instruments of violence particular to each of their filmic scenarios. Yet their stillness invests each painting with a power that, for the art historian Dario Gamboni, belongs to the 'potential images': pictures whose meanings remain deliberately indeterminate and dependent upon the reaction and/or interpretative imagination of the viewer.¹⁸ The pose of Gasser's characters enact defiance in its most basic and existential sense. Untethered from their clear political, moral or narrative content, the figures in *Heroes and Ghosts* manifest new analogies and connections among its viewers. Its ghosts and characters, its heroes and anti-heroes, are revealed in their itinerant traversal of time, media and mind. Their power lies in their inevitable return.

- 1 Modern narrative has often positioned the image of the ghost as a metaphor for our disjuncture with the past and the idea of a progressive history: see Jean-François Hamel, *Revenances de l'histoire. Répétition, narrativité, modernité* (Paris: Minuit, 2015); see also Derrida's hauntology, in Jacques Derrida, 'Spectres of Marx', *New Left Review* 205 (1994), pp. 31–58.
- 2 Gerald Figal, *Civilization and Monsters: Spirits of Modernity in Meiji Japan* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1999).
- 3 Robert Musil, *The Man without Qualities*, trans. Sophie Wilkins and Burton Pike (New York: Vintage, 1996), p. 77.
- 4 Gabriela Stoicea, 'Moosbrugger and the Case for Responsibility in Robert Musil's *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*', *German Quarterly* 91:1 (2018), pp. 49–66; Wilhelm Braun, 'Moosbrugger Dances', *Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory* 35:3 (1960), pp. 214–230.
- 5 Didi-Huberman has argued that Warburg's pathos-formulae are connected to Freud's conception of the symptom: see Georges Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image: Phantoms of Time and Time of Phantoms – Aby Warburg's History of Art* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016).
- 6 Matthew Vollgraft, 'The Archive and the Labyrinth: On the Contemporary *Bilderatlas*', *October* 149 (2014), pp. 143–158.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 155.
- 8 John Berger, 'Drawn to that Moment', in John Berger, *The Sense of Sight*, ed. Lloyd Spencer (New York: Vintage, 1985), pp. 146–152: p. 149.
- 9 Email from the artist, 27 June 2018.
- 10 David Morgan, 'Finding Fabiola', in Karen Kelly and Lynne Cooke, with Bettina Funcke (eds), *Francis Alys: Fabiola – An Investigation* (New York: Dia Art Foundation, 2008), pp. 11–21: p. 21.
- 11 Alexander Nemerov, *Icons of Grief: Val Lewton's Home Front Pictures* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).
- 12 *Ibid.*, pp. 97–131.
- 13 The series was recently featured in the worldwide-traveling exhibition *Uprisings*, curated by Georges Didi-Huberman, conceived as a Warburg-inspired atlas combining a wide range of images which exhibit the collective gesture of dissent and political revolt across time and media: see the exhibition catalogue, Georges Didi-Huberman (ed), *Uprisings* (Paris: Gallimard/Jeu de Paume, 2016).
- 14 For more on this topic, see Benjamin Young, 'Arresting Figures', *Grey Room* 55 (2014), pp. 78–115, as well as Stephanie Schwartz, 'Waiting: Loops in Time', in Stephanie Schwartz (ed.), *In Focus: Waiting for Tear Gas 1999–2000 by Allan Sekula*, Tate Research Publication (2016); online at <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/in-focus/waiting-for-tear-gas-allan-sekula/loops-in-time> (accessed 4 December 2020).
- 15 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill & Wang, 1981), p. 89.
- 16 See Tristan Garcia, 'Avant-hier, après-demain. Science-fiction, fantaisie et philosophies de l'histoire', *Revue Oscillations* 3 (2014), pp. 275–312.
- 17 Henri Michaux, *Une voie pour l'insubordination* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1980).
- 18 Dario Gamboni, *Potential Images: Ambiguity and Indeterminacy in Modern Art*, trans. Mark Treharne (London: Reaktion Books, 2008).