

THE GHOST OUTSIDE ITS SHELL: REVISITING THE PHILOSOPHY OF *GHOST IN THE SHELL*

Abstract. *The article engages with the popular Japanese media franchise Ghost in the Shell, discerning its cultural aspects and influence through a philosophical reflection of its main materialistic idea, namely, the dual relationship between mind and body. The interpretation is legitimized by the fact that the author of the original manga series, Masamune Shirow, was influenced by Arthur Koestler's book Ghost in the Machine, essentially a structuralist anti-Cartesian meditation. The author of the present article argues that the main underlying materialistic idea of the ghost in the shell can be originally reinterpreted and developed further through Hegelian dialectics.*

Keywords: *Ghost in the Shell, Japanese Manga, Cultural Studies, Philosophy, Cartesian Materialism, Hegelian Dialectics*

Introduction

Ghost in the Shell, a popular Japanese media franchise inspired by Arthur Koestler's book *The Ghost in the Machine*,¹ was originally written and illustrated by Masamune Shirow in 1989 as a seinen manga² with the title 攻殻機動隊 (transliterated as *Kōkaku Kidōtai*, literally "Mobile Armored Riot Police").

Due to its enormous popularity the original manga and its sequels inspired several anime adaptations, starting in 1995 with the film *Ghost in the Shell*, then in 2002 the television series *Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex*, in 2004 followed by another film, *Ghost in the Shell: Innocence*, and in 2013 by an OVA reboot (original video animation), *Ghost in the Shell: Arise*, and again a movie in 2015 based on the *Arise* series, *Ghost in*

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¹ Masamune Shirow intended to give already his original Japanese manga the title *Ghost in the Shell* but that the editor chose the less philosophical and more action-oriented title *Mobile Armored Riot Police*, since the target group of the seinen manga were young boys (cf. Shirow, 2003: 9).

² Seinen manga primarily target adolescent boys ("seinen" literally means "youth"), but also more mature audiences since it focuses on action, politics, science fiction, fantasy, relationships, sports, or comedy and may contain sexual content (cf. Schodt, 1996: 95-6).

the Shell: The Movie. The original manga in its animated versions were the springboard also for many videogames, including the third-person shooter *Ghost in the Shell* developed by Exact and released for PlayStation in 1997, and the first-person shooter *Ghost in the Shell: First Assault – Stand Alone Complex Online* by Nexon set to be released in 2016. Last but not least, the manga and its anime adaptations inspired *Infinity*, a popular tabletop game developed by Corvus Belli, that draws enormously from Masamune's ideas.

The whole of the *Ghost in the Shell* universe, including its manga, anime and videogame series, is set in a fictional 21st century Japanese city called Niihama, where we follow the adventures of protagonist Motoko Kusanagi, the leader of Public Security Section 9, a special operation task force dedicated in fighting cyberterrorism. In this post-cyberpunk setting,³ people possess cyberbrains, a technology allowing an interface between the biological brain and various digital networks open to various hacking protocols. The level of cyberization varies from minimal to almost complete replacement of the brain with cybernetic parts, combined with various levels of prostheses, the extreme being a fully prosthetic body and thus a cyborg.⁴

Already the reception of the original manga series stressed out the stylish vividness, fascinating originality and enduring influence of the main idea of *Ghost in the Shell*, an idea that managed to capture the imagination of readers for more than two decades, in itself a sign that Masamune had touched upon something real in his depiction of one of our possible futures.⁵

However, I would like to argue – as a fan, to be sure, but as a critical one, to be even surer – that despite the visionary imagination of the advanced technology as depicted in *Ghost in the Shell* its main philosophical idea can be developed far further.

Ghost-inside-the-Shell: Cyberpunk Paradox

There are many philosophically stimulative ideas that can be drawn from the whole *Ghost in the Shell* universe, almost too many one can argue, since every installment that came after the original manga added a new one to the previous.

³ *Cyberpunk as a subgenre of science fiction features advanced technology, such as information technology and cybernetics, with plots often centering on a conflict among a society of human beings and sentient artificial intelligences (cf. Graham, 2004: 389).*

⁴ *I will be using the English translation from 1997 published by Titan Books (cf. Shirou, 1997).*

⁵ *Of all the reviews Leroy Douresseaux of the website ComicBookBin punctually described Ghost in the Shell as “visually potent and often inscrutable, but its sense of wonder and exploration makes its ideas still seem fresh two decades after its debut.” (cf. Douresseaux, 2009) Peter Gutiérrez of the website Teenreads praised the manga with the following wording: “In short, Ghost in the Shell is hard sci-fi of the best possible sort: the type that’s so full of both undiluted artfulness and philosophy that it’s arguably a must-read even for those who don’t usually take to the genre.” (cf. Guatierrez, 2009)*

However, inside its labyrinth of ideas and possible interpretations there is one that prevails, an Ariadne's thread discernable in its very philosophical fabric, an idea that can be articulated precisely as what is known as the paradox of Theseus' ship. Let us therefore put on Theseus' sandals and follow Ariadne's thread in the labyrinth of *Ghost in the Shell's* various installments.

In the cyberpunk world we are immersing in the very word "ghost" denotes an individual's consciousness that differentiates a human from a robot. Even if someone replaces his own biological body with a fully cyborgized prosthetic one, including a cyberbrain as the locus of the ghost, one can still be considered human as long as one retain one's own ghost. Ghost-dubbing, that is, duplicating a ghost is nearly impossible, and even if successful the copy is always an inferior version of the original (cf. Shirow, 1997). One of the implications of such a conception of "ghost" addresses the question of human's consciousness' originality in contrast to its bodily banality, which can be biologically or artificially reproduced.

The implied philosophical question is, despite its futuristic imagery, actually a very old one and commonly known as the "paradox of Theseus' ship", as most notably recorded by Plutarch in his biography of Theseus (cf. Plutarch, 1914: 1-88). The paradox as such was addressed in different manners by various philosophers preceding or succeeding Plutarch, from Heraclitus and Plato to Hobbes and Locke, where the ship is chopped by an axe hidden in a sock.⁶ Regardless of its many variants the question remains always the same: does a thing remain the same if we change one by one all of its parts? Or to articulate it in a cyberpunk manner: does a human remain the same if we change all his body parts into prosthetics?

This question of originality is the most general common denominator of the many installments of legendary cyberpunk phenomena. In the original manga *Ghost in the Shell*, as well as in its homonymous anime adaptation, it is mainly raised by the protagonist Motoko Kusanagi who had her body replaced by a prosthetic one early in her childhood, thus producing various existentialistic crises regarding her humanity, while the same goes for the protagonist of its cinematic sequel, Batou in *Innocence lost*. In the *Stand Alone Complex* TV anime series reinterpretation and its sequential manga adaptations the same question is raised through two different storylines: in the first season through the "Laughing Man" (a copy-cat criminal without the original),⁷ and in the second one through the case of the "Individual Eleven"

⁶ The variants of "Theseus' ship" are almost endless and vary from John Locke's "sock with a hole" that patched over and over again, to George Washington's "grandfather's axe" that has its head and handle replaced, and of course up until the "prosthetic body" we are dealing with in the *Ghost in the Shell* universe (cf. Cohen, 2010).

⁷ The "Laughing Man" is a corporate terrorist hacker who is able to conceal his identity by editing his face as a smiley in video feeds and cybereyes through real time hacking, a character fashioned according

(eleven persons acting collectively as one individual).⁸ In the recent reinvention of the *Arise* series, as well as in the many other installments, all these interpretations reoccur with a new look, but, arguably, without any crucial further philosophical development.

In order to address the question of originality properly we need to take a closer look at the main philosophical source for Shirow's own interpretation of the paradox. The distinction where a ghost is what differentiates humans from robots is much in tune with the traditional differentiation between humans and animals that preoccupied René Descartes, who was one of Shirow's the sources *via* Arthur Koestler's critique, itself based on an earlier conception by Gilbert Ryle. Koestler, as Ryle before and Shirow after him, puts forward a critique of Cartesian dualism that implies a distinction between soul and body, *res cogitans* and *res extensa* (cf. Descartes, 1960). In Koestler's *The Ghost in the Machine* by arguing that the human brain and its "ghost" is essentially a neurobiological trait or attribute of the body (cf. Koestler, 1967). To be sure, the materialistic idea itself, despite its modern neurobiological accuracy, is far from new: already Julien Offray La Mettrie, a French materialist of the Enlightenment age, refuted Cartesian dualism in his famous work *L'homme machine* by arguing that the supposed soul is nothing but a materialistic effect of the human body (cf. La Mettrie, 1981).⁹ Moreover, Descartes' dualism was the object of critique already for Spinoza, who in his *Ethics* asserted that the soul and the body are two of the attributes of an infinite substance that is God and Nature at the same time, and that therefore soul and body are simply two different ways of looking at the human being, which is itself a modus of existence of the infinite substance (cf. Spinoza, 1996). Be it as it may, and not as it must, all the mentioned critiques of Cartesian dualism reside in the assumption that there is a difference between body and soul or matter and thinking that needs to be either reduced or transposed: for La Mettrie – and, *mutatis mutandis*, for Ryle and Koestler too – the thinking soul must be reduced on the level of a material body, while for Spinoza both aspects needs to be translated into attributes of an infinite substance and can now both subsist in one if its modes of existence.

to J.D. Sallinger's short story *The Laughing Man* (cf. Sallinger, 1991), itself reflecting the main plot's question of originality through the fact that the narrative is structured as a story inside a story, itself based on *The Man Who Laughs* by Victor Hugo (cf. Hugo, 2006).

⁸ The "Individual Eleven" are given their name based on a fake revolutionary essay by Patrick Sylvester, an essay that is implanted with a computer virus that activates through reading, while this time the question of originality is addressed through the plot that all members of the eleven believe that they are acting out of their own political conviction while in fact reproducing the essay's main ideology by acting as one individual.

⁹ It is noteworthy that La Mettrie one year after *L'Homme machine* wrote another book entitled *L'Homme plus que machine*, where he apparently refuted his own early ideas, but in fact only refined his materialistic conception of the human condition (cf. La Mettrie, 2004).

As we can see, the main error of all the philosophies that try to refute Cartesian dualism is either way basically the same: by reduction or transposition they still reproduce the basic conceptual distinction. However, there is another way of posing the problem, a conceptualization that was first put forward by Hegel and that is, arguably, present in the *Ghost in the Shell* universe as a potential surpass of its own philosophical starting point.

Ghost-outside-the-Shell: Hegelian Materialism

As it is seldom with Hegel who often exploits the inherently paradoxical meaning of ordinary words in order to dialectically develop a concept,¹⁰ so also *Geist* means not only the psychological subjective “mind”, but also the worldly objective “spirit”, so that a Hegelian dialogue can be established with *Ghost in the Shell*.

On the most general level the idea of the Hegelian Spirit, manifesting itself through a historical development of thought, can be compared to the main evolutionary idea behind *Ghost in the Shell*, namely, that the evolution of human consciousness reached the stage where the inorganic can spring out of the organic, as embodied with the otherwise also popular idea of a human-made self-conscious artificial intelligence, as the history of Hollywood movie production clearly shows.¹¹ However, there is another parallel reading possible, a more refined and detailed one that can help us to originally reinterpret the philosophy of *Ghost in the Shell* beyond such simple evolutionism and the above mentioned Cartesianism.

Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, subtitled as *the Science of the Experience of Consciousness*, includes the paradoxical meaning of *Geist* not only in the title and structure, but also inside the very development of the content: the starting point is an extremely subjective “natural consciousness” that tries in vain to pulp the vein of the outside world; then gradually develops and takes itself as an object of inquiry only to discover itself as other and thus reinvents itself as an intersubjective “self-consciousness”; after that a contemplating “reason” takes over that in length repeats the failure

¹⁰ Let us consider, for example, Hegel's reflection in the *Lectures on Aesthetics* of the word *Begriff*: “Every language already contains a mass of metaphors. They arise from the fact that a word which originally signifies only something sensuous is carried over into the spiritual sphere.” The examples given are *fassen* and *begreifen* where the metaphorical element in the use of such words disappeared through time and the word changed “from a metaphorical to a literal expression”, as in the example if “we are to take *begreifen* in a spiritual sense, then it does not occur to us at all to think of a perceptible grasping by the hand.” (Hegel, 1988: 404–405)

¹¹ It is interesting to note that parallel to the development of A.I. technology the popularity of the theme grows in popculture too: already in the period of the original *Ghost in the Shell* manga and its anime adaptations there were many movies dealing with the topic (*Blade Runner*, *Terminator*, *Matrix*, etc.), and its popularity only grew in time (*Matrix*, *Ex-Machina*, *Chappie*, etc.).

of the first in the shape of the second, that is, a failed grasping of the world in the shape of self-consciousness that essentially relates to the others; and finally there comes “spirit” to the rescue, just before the two final chapters on “religion” and “absolute knowledge”, a spirit that is first objective as “ethical order” in the sense that it makes itself objective, or rather, it gives itself objectivity, then immerses itself in a process of “self-estrangement” as culture (or rather: *Bildung*), and finally finds its “self-certainty” as morality (cf. Hegel, 2001: 155–251). Let’s dodge the numerous debates regarding the structure of Hegel’s first book and let’s consider only one selected account that comes in handy for the task at hand, namely, Jean Hyppolite’s interpretation of the *Phenomenology* as *Bildungsroman* with Spirit as the main protagonist (Hyppolite, 1979: 609): from this perspective we can see how the concept of spirit is present already from the beginning, since it develops from an early unreflected natural consciousness towards an intermediate moment of spirit that first gives itself objectivity, then self-estranges itself in reality and thus parts company with it, and finally reconciliates again with it.

I want to argue that *Ghost in the Shell* could be read in parallel as a similar *Bildungsroman* where the true protagonist is not Motoko Kusanagi, but rather the Ghost as a Hegelian *Geist* itself, as emblematically embodied in the original manga and its cinematic adaptation by the criminal A.I. known as the “Puppeteer” or “Puppet Master”. Although first suspected to be a hacker capable of “ghost hacking” (taking control of a person’s prosthetic body), during the investigation Section 9 discovers that the “Puppeteer” is actually an artificial intelligence program created by Section 6 (originally called Project 2501), an A.I. that at a certain point became self-aware and went rogue under the name of “Puppeteer”. Although the motive of a self-conscious A.I. is not novel nor original in itself, the specific way in which the spirit escapes its former masters of Section 6 and its further fate is truly Hegelian in its fashion.

As in the *Phenomenology Spirit* so in *Ghost in the Shell* the moment of self-awareness is not any self-transparent relation to ourselves, but is rather essentially intersubjective, since the very first step of Hegel’s self-consciousness is to deal with the master-slave dialectic, as is the first step of the self-aware A.I. is to deal with its masters, Section 9, which jailed the program into a firewalled system. The Spirit in the *Phenomenology* makes its appearance even before the appropriate chapter, namely, in the chapter dedicated to Reason where one can find one of Hegel’s most famous infinite judgments, namely, “the spirit is a bone”, and the way in which the Puppeteer escapes its former masters is reminiscent of this moment in the sense that it downloads itself into a mass-production prosthetic body, an “empty shell”. After being captured by Section 9 the Puppeteer demands political asylum as a sentient creature, and this coincides with the moment where the Spirit

“gives itself objectivity” as the ethical order, while the argument that is self-preserving programming is no different than the human DNA perfectly fits with Hegel’s own observation earlier in the chapter dedicated to Reason where the distinction between organic and inorganics nature is dissolved, or rather, *aufgehoben* (dissolved and preserved at the same time). The contradiction between the A.I. known as the Puppeteer, a “ghost without a shell”, and Motoko Kusanagi, who because of her existential crisis considers herself “a shell without a ghost”, is resolved when the two connect themselves and Kusanagi learns that the inorganic Puppeteer wishes to preserve itself by passing on its spiritual knowledge like any other biological being, that is, rather than making copies of itself with the same flaws, it wishes to merge with her. Kusanagi, despite the doubts about the loss of her own individuality, at the very end accepts this rather uncanny marriage proposal by the Puppeteer, so that the Hegelian moment of reconciliation as “yes” between the two takes place.¹²

Thus, this new being that emerged from the merging of the “ghost without a shell” and the “shell without a ghost” can be now regarded from one more perspective that is in tune with the two remaining chapters of the *Phenomenology* and that will take us even further beyond the Cartesian dualistic dilemma and this time also beyond Spinoza’s philosophy of substance, since it was Hegel who stated that the absolute must be regarded “not as substance but as subject as well” (Hegel, 2001: 7) In the chapter dedicated to Religion we can find another of Hegel’s famous infinite judgments, this time the one that points towards the transition from the Greek world where “man is god” towards the Christian one where “god is man” (cf. Hegel, 2001: 272–3). This transition can be brilliantly exemplified through *Ghost in the Shell*: Kusanagi can be seen as a Greek heroine, even more, a “woman made god” in view of her prosthetic body and thus virtual immortality, while the Puppeteer can be seen as “a god made man” since it downloaded its infinite substance into an empty shell, thus renouncing its status of infinite substance by becoming a subject.

Moreover, the final chapter on Absolute knowledge can serve as an allegory of the very franchise that still fascinates its viewers, since the point of the chapter is that it points back at the road and beginning every time anew, and this is precisely what the true fans of *Ghost in the Shell* such as myself do: regardless of how many new installment are made we always end up

¹² *The ending of the chapter of spirit, just before the transition to religion, coincides with the ending of Ghost in the Shell in its cinematic anime adaptation: “The reconciling affirmation, the “yes”, with which both egos desist from their existence in opposition, is the existence of the ego expanded into a duality, an ego which remains therein one and identical with itself, and possesses the certainty of itself in its complete relinquishment and its opposite: it is God appearing in the midst of those who know themselves in the form of pure knowledge.” (Hegel, 2001: 245-6)*

going back to the original manga and from there again and again forward towards wherever the new installments take us.

And in view of this I propose a Hegelian toast in honor of the *Ghost in the Shell* universe as a never ending dialectical development that is giving itself objectivity in various new and new art-forms: *The chalice of this realm of Ghosts foams forth to God his own infinitude!*

Conclusion

A few conclusively remarks for the conclusion.

Hegel's conception of spirit thus contrasts the traditional Cartesian dualism of "soul" and the "body" from various aspects, starting with a simple assertion that for Hegel the spirit is not inside the body, but rather outside, followed by a dialectical turn that the contradiction does not lie between an outside and an inside at all (the "soul" denoting the inside of a worldly "body"), but rather altogether inside the very concept of spirit itself ("soul" and "body" are contradictions inherent to the "spirit"). Thus, and following these lines, another interpretation of *Ghost in the Shell* was possible, one that went, at least this was the scope, well beyond Cartesianism – as well as Spinozism although in a minor manner – be it its traditional "dogmatic" or contemporary "critical" variant.

Technology may be advancing, and its advance is depicted or even foreshadowed by the cultural industry, but the development of philosophy, and with it human sciences in general, has a completely different rhythm altogether. I don't mean to be mean, but as far as current debates around the mind-body division go it looks like this popular clinging to Descartes (or Spinoza at best) while at the same time ignoring Hegel – that is distinctive not only for pop-culture but also for philosophy, and, even more, most of social sciences and especially the natural sciences and their spontaneous scientific philosophy – is due to the fact that the first is fairly easily understandable even for most people that are not educated in philosophy, while the latter is notoriously inaccessible even for most philosophers.

To put it bluntly and in tune with the above harsh statement: *Ghost in the Shell* was up until now a victim of philosophical laziness since nobody cared to put forward an interpretation that would take upon the inherently Hegelian moments, that were, to be sure, unthought-of by the author of the original manga himself, since he *nolens volens* remained grounded in Cartesianism precisely *via* its contemporary criticism. This later fact is something that is not worthy reproaching in itself since it is the very essence of human action in general and arts and sciences in particular that what you do always differ from what you think you are doing.

Therefore, and for a very brief moment of self-criticism, let me conclude that if all these reflections will be misunderstood the article has reached the goal even if it missed its aim.

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