1. Introduction

'A Guest + A Host = A Ghost'
Marcel Duchamp[1]

1.1. Encountering the Ethical Facticity

The *Night of the Hunter*, based on the titular novel by Davis Grubb and directed by Charles Laughton, is arguably one of the finest examples of the film noir genre. It tells the story of Reverend Harry Powell (famously portrayed by Robert Mitchum – perhaps in the best moment of his film career), a charismatic serial killer travelling along the Ohio River in West Virginia during the Great Depression. After being imprisoned for driving a stolen car, he learns that his cellmate, Ben Harper, who is sentenced to die, has left $10,000 with his family. Upon being freed, Powell visits Harper's family. His plan, obviously, is to find the hidden money and steal it. His means of executing the plan? Gain their trust – by claiming that he helped Harper spiritually in his final moments – and seduce them. In a bucolic-gothic scenery, a blurry world haunted by the absence of God – America of the Great Depression – Reverend Powell appears before the townspeople with his towering figure and his baritone, quasi-crooning voice and addresses them from a position of height. Among desolate creatures, perplexed in their struggle to find a balance between Good and Evil, Powell, this well-rehearsed charlatan, seems to possess a unique, sovereign standing, potentially promising to endow his audience with the same.

1 This pun by Marcel Duchamp was printed on the wrappers of candies handed out by the artist at the opening of a Parisian show in 1953. Marcel Duchamp, *A Guest + A Host = A Ghost*, 1953.

Festooned across his fingers are the words 'LOVE' and 'HATE', mirroring the internal strife of his audience (maybe his own as well?). His body signifies the fundamental *aporia* in discerning between the two, his preaching reverberates, sketching a passage towards overcoming the aporia, promising, thus, the much-coveted standing:

> Ah, little lad, you're staring at my fingers. Would you like me to tell you the little story of right-hand/left-hand? The story of Good and Evil? H-A-T-E! It was with this left hand that old brother Cain struck the blow that laid his brother low. L-O-V-E! You see these fingers, dear hearts? These fingers has veins that run straight to the soul of man. The right hand, friends, the hand of love. Now watch, and I'll show you the story of life. These fingers, dear hearts, is always a-warring and a-tugging, one agin' t' other. Now watch 'em! Old brother left-hand, left-hand hate's a-fighting, and it looks like love's a goner. But wait a minute! Hot dog, love's a winning! Yessirree! It's love that won, and old left-hand hate is down for the count!

Powell narrates the story of Good and Evil, a story in which – in quasi-teleological fashion – Good prevails. By pointing to this horizon of Good's final domination, he intends to fill his addressees with false hopes, enchant them, turn their heads towards a putative messianic future that will heal their wounds, and disorientate them from their present: that's how he will get away with the money. At the same time, however, his presence and acting per se constitute a performative refutation of the above: the fight between Good and Evil takes place in the *here and now*, in a present characterised by a chaotic heterogeneity of (evil?) intentions and interests, a *noir* present of suffering, vulnerability, and bleakness. What the demonic, deeply disturbing presence of Reverend Powell teaches performatively is that overcoming suffering, sheltering vulnerability, and, eventually, opting for Good, require an active, dynamic assertion of our standing under the empire of the 'noir' sun. As contradictory as it may sound, Reverend Powell teaches us through a negative gesture that the synchronisation of our – often – contradictory claims and the ostracism of any kind of abusive attitude in the present – such as the one reproduced by Powell himself – demands of us an ethical vigilance, the etching of a personal ground on the basis of which ethical decision-making is possible.

Taking a step back from the *Night of the Hunter* and reflecting overall on the film noir genre, we will notice that some of its reigning stylistic conventions, such as the unsettling camera angles or the dramatic use of shadow and light, are there to serve an environment of ethical ambiguity and murkiness.[2] In the setting of this environment – that can be explained with reference to the political instability of the era in which the genre flourished, between 1940 and 1958 – we can further observe the frequent employment of a narrative trick which sets the plot into motion: it is past midnight, cold and dark, except for the faint light of the stars,[3] when a *stranger* – as in the case of Reverend Powell – bursts into the scene. His[4] presence is enigmatic, elusive, as if roaming in a ghostly interspace between presence and absence: less than present, for he cannot be immobilised into a shaped object of understanding or sclerotised into a status, for he is intact, untouchable by our consciousness, rather overflowing it. More than absent, for despite being intact, he is nonetheless touching, not to say obsessing: look at the eyes of Reverend Powell's audience upon his mysterious arrival, their bodies that nearly tremble, their souls that shiver. How shall we explain the cinematic employment of this *mysterium tremendum*, of the uninvited guest, who, through a *double bind* gesture, by knocking on the door of my dwelling (Heim), *questions* its stability with his incomprehensible (non-) status, while simultaneously reaffirming its foundations – for retroactively the noir setting seems to have been

2 For an informative study of the ethical background of many central film noir oeuvres, see Aeon J. Skoble, 'Moral Clarity and Practical Reason in Film Noir', in *The Philosophy of Film Noir*, ed. Mark T. Conrad (The University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 41–48.

3 No wonder this is precisely the way Shakespeare (a film noir ancestor?) sets the scene for the encounter between Hamlet and the ghost of his father in front of the platform. No wonder the setting has to be ghostly since the stranger intruding is nothing but a *ghost*. See William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet,* ed. Edward Dowden (Methuen and Co., 1899), Act I, Scene IV, 36.

4 Historically, this role was played by male actors; the masculine grammatical gender follows that convention. In the remainder of this study, the feminine pronoun will be employed when referring to concepts such as 'person', 'subject', 'self', and 'other', with the exception of quoted passages, where the masculine forms used by the respective authors are maintained.

constituted only to welcome the Event of his arrival? How shall we approach this quasi-ghostly presence, *unheimlich* and *heimlich, guest* to the setting he intrudes upon and *host* to the narrative flow he initiates?

Our interest here is not to delve deeply into the cinematic language that enables the development of the aforementioned visualisation. It is the symbolic need to employ the visualisation itself that concerns us, the deep existential chord that this noir narrative technique – the *fact* of the stranger's arrival within a setting of ethical ambiguity and bleakness – strikes. Some hints have already been made regarding the demonic performance of Harry Powell: his arrival performatively highlights the moral murkiness of his times and addresses a demand to distinguish between Good and Evil, a demand to form a principle of practical reasoning according to which the various heterogeneous needs and claims can be brought to some kind of equilibrium. Harry Powell, this mysterious, poisonous *guest*, becomes an unexpected *host*, welcoming the townspeople through his demand to a new state of being: the standing to shelter their vulnerability, what we may call *ethical subjectivity*. This is precisely the deep existential chord that this convention strikes: the emergence of subjectivity.

Simon Critchley, drawing inspiration from Dieter Henrich's analysis in 'The Concept of Moral Insight',[5] argues that ethical subjectivity is constructed on the basis of what he calls 'ethical experience': the experience of a *demand* to which the ego gives her *approval*.[6] The essential feature of ethical experience is that 'the subject of the demand – the moral self – affirms that demand, assents to finding it good, binds itself to that good and shapes its subjectivity in relation to that good'.[7] The approval of the demand, according to the aforementioned structure, is not an autonomous rational choice, for subjectivity is precisely the

5 Dieter Henrich, 'The Concept of Moral Insight and Kant's Doctrine of the Fact of Reason', trans. Manfred Kuehn, in *The Unity of Reason: Essays on Kant's Philosophy*, ed. Richard L. Velkley, trans. Jeffrey Edwards, Louis Hunt, Manfred Kuehn and Guenter Zoeller (Harvard University Press, 1994), 55–87.

6 Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (Verso, 2008), 14.

7 Ibid., 17.

artifact constructed by the approval. On the contrary, the demand seems to slip in like a thief into the ego, causing the first subjective shiver, and the subject that has been formulated by spiralling around this demand, retroactively approves it, acknowledging it as the axis of her subjective structure.[8] The ethical experience described is not just one aspect of life that can be simply placed alongside other aesthetic, epistemic, or political aspects of it; as Critchley highlights, it shall be considered as what founds the subject, organising it around certain values and commitments.[9]

1.2. The Question(s)

If subjectivity is formulated as a *response* to a demand that imposes itself upon the self, a demand that summons her to stand in the world and take her existence in her own hands, organising the multiplicity of the flows of desire pulsating within her, it is implied that the material of her formulation is *responsibility*. My place in the sun, my authority to exact (a minimum of) respect and address claims, my standing within the community, my dignity, my freedom, presuppose my subjection to the facticity of a demand that holds me responsible for compliance. Identifying our subjective material is of course a good first step towards trying to elaborate on what it means to be a subject, to relate to myself and to others, but it is only this: a first step. We need to know more about the nature of this demand summoning us; we need to shed light on it. Where does this demand come from, who is it that addresses it to me, endowing me with my subjective status? Most importantly: what does this otherness demand of me? *What should I do?*

8 As Critchley explains, the concept of experience does not necessarily signify 'a passive display of externally received images in the theatre of consciousness'. It does not consist in a sheer passivity but in an activity, 'the activity of the subject, even when that activity is the receptivity to the other's claim upon me – it is an active receptivity'. Ibid., 14.

9 Ibid., 20–21.

What should I do? The first signifier of our subjective language seems to be the question of responsibility, the first subjective shiver within the realm of time consists in an *aporia* that commits us to respond. 'What should I do?', this is according to Immanuel Kant the fundamental question of practical reason,[10] and it seems that our thread of thought cannot help but get entangled with his work. We are not surprised: as Jean-Luc Nancy holds, Kant's response to the question of responsibility, the *categorical imperative*, is *haunting* our thought as an 'inalienable obligation'. Ignoring it, thus, or setting it aside is impossible since 'the notion of absolute commandment, its urgent tone, and coercive gesture' are an inescapable landmark in our thinking.[11]

In one of his most inspiring writings, the essay 'An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment', Kant defines Enlightenment as 'the human being's emancipation from its self-incurred immaturity'. Immaturity is defined as the 'inability to make use of one's intellect without the direction of another' and it is self-incurred when its cause does not lie in a lack of intellect, but rather in a 'lack of resolve and courage' to use it 'without the direction of another'.[12] In the practical field, the transition from the darkness of receiving guidance from another to enlightened emancipation is expressed in the basic principle of Kantian ethics,[13] *autonomy*: the only maxims upon which I should act are the ones I *rationally* give myself. It is exactly by virtue of this capacity to be guided by the internal voice of reason – a capacity equal to that of free action – that I acquire my standing as a moral authority: as a source of legislation, in other words, which shall not just act as an automaton, passively surrendering to external demands (articulated, for

10 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge University Press, 1998), A805/B833. References to passages of Kant's texts follow the Berlin Academy pagination of his works.

11 Jean-Luc Nancy, 'The Kategorein of Excess', trans. James Gilbert-Walsh and Simon Sparks, in *A Finite Thinking*, ed. Simon Sparks (Stanford University Press, 2003), 133–134.

12 Immanuel Kant, 'An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?', in *Toward Perpetual Peace and Other Writings on Politics, Peace, and History*, ed. Pauline Kleingeld, trans. David L. Colclasure (Yale University Press, 2006), 8:35.

13 The terms ethics and morality are used interchangeably within the text.

instance, by the monarch, tradition, or even one's desires) that are not acknowledged as binding by one's own intellect.

For Kantian ethics, rationality is the principle of humanity – what Rawls lyrically calls 'the aristocracy of all'.[14] It constitutes the quality that allows – and obligates – human beings to leave aside all *matter* in their deliberation – that is, any empirical object of desire – and guide their will solely by the representation of the mere *form* of the law, which, in Kant's thought, is necessarily *universal*. Universalisation ensures that the norm upon which I act is legitimate to the extent that it can be freely acknowledged as valid by every rational agent. The imperative to universalise is *categorical*, insofar as the morality of an action is not conditioned on any external end; the action is represented by one's reason as objectively necessary of itself. In legislating autonomously – that is, guided solely by one's reason – I am, hence, making a law of universal validity, since such a law is structurally consistent with the will of every rational agent; autonomy therefore entails universality. Such is, in a nutshell, the argument for the categorical imperative.

In his second *Critique*, Kant famously claims that the moral law is given as an apodictically certain *fact of pure reason*, a fact which 'forces itself upon us of itself as a synthetic a priori proposition that is not based on any intuition', either pure (such as the command of an exterior entity like God) or empirical (for instance, a feeling), and is thus *unconditional*.[15] We can again detect here Critchley's schema concerning the emergence of subjectivity: in practically deliberating, I encounter a fact that places an overwhelming demand upon me and in relation to which I shape myself as a subject.[16] Humanity in my face is vindicated only insofar as I reflect rationally, purify my will from any phenomenal objects of desire, and act in accordance with the fundamental formal law of pure practical reason. The road towards becoming

14 John Rawls, 'The Moral Psychology of the *Religion*, Book I', in *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy*, ed. Barbara Herman (Harvard University Press, 2000), 306. Cited in Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, 32.

15 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reaso*n, trans. and ed. Mary Gregor (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 5:31.

16 See Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, 37.

a subject in the Kantian doctrine is a road of (painful) *ascension*: an ascension from the phenomenal to the noumenal by subordinating one's inclinations to the demands of reason.

On Kant's account, in directing my will and action according to the moral law, I attain my much-coveted place in the sun; by taking a liberating distance from the noir heterogeneity of my personal interests, needs, and inclinations, I am no longer an automaton, a link in the causal chain of the phenomenal world that is passively determined by them. On the contrary, the fact of reason makes me aware of my freedom, of my ability to transcend the deterministic causal series and initiate it anew each time as the site where the unconditional law of freedom breathes – as a self-legislator. In the moral bleakness of the noir phenomenal world, I acquire an inalienable sovereignty, *dignity* – the authority to address claims that are in reflective equilibrium with the respective sovereignty of others. It is the enlightened sovereign self that constitutes the transcendental condition of the intersubjective terrain of ethics; it is the moral law within me that enables me to stand and rationally evaluate the demands of others that surround me.

This is a faint sketch of the emergence from the darkness of self-incurred immaturity to the enlightened field of practical reason, which demands that the subject actively stand in the ethical terrain by refusing to passively surrender to the force of any heteronomous summons. We cannot help but admire the majesty of the Kantian critical project and the unconditional duty that arises from it: keep questioning everything that enslaves the subject, keep unveiling every dogmatism or transcendental illusion that obscures her incalculability, stay vigilant against any kind of totalitarianism; everything can and ought to become an object of rational reflection, of *critique*.

Is this really the case though? Can everything become an object of critique? Can we also include within our critical scope the transcendental conditions that enable critique itself? Would this imply that the structures of reason are themselves reproducing a kind of totalitarianism that needs to be unveiled? If so, what would be the standpoint from

which we could expose them by conducting this *critique of the critique*? And what would urge us towards such a move?

Posing questions in such a scattered and anxious way does little to advance our inquiry. We do have, however, some insights on the basis of which our thread of thought can unfold: Jacques Derrida has, throughout his work, given prominence to the fact that the tradition of Western logocentrism has historically shaped its symbolic space through the construction of bipolar structures in which '… we are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of a *vis-à-vis*, but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other (axiologically, logically, etc.), or has the upper hand'.[17] The aforementioned symptom can be emphatically identified within the Kantian architectonic: reason against experience, activity against passivity, self against other. In the hierarchies marking the Kantian corpus, Emmanuel Levinas detects the manifestation of what he calls 'imperialism of the Same': autonomy, the capacity to *actively* give oneself a *rational* law without reference to any external force, implies a sovereign subject who, through her reflective authority, encompasses any kind of *otherness* in the quasi-autopoietic machinery of reason within her, thereby sacrificing the heterogeneity of *experience* and the other person's alterity – reducing, hence, the field of morality, responsibility, and interpersonal connection to the relation with a mediating, neutralising law.[18]

If this suspicion is valid, then a *critique of the critique* – may we say an *autoimmune critique*? – is more than necessary. What would it look like? If the object of such critique is the putative tyranny of the Kantian enlightened hierarchies, what we would need to attempt is to set them out of joint; not by reversing the terms of the hierarchy – an intellectual move that would leave the very structure intact – but by creating passages between them: annihilating the distance that separates them, contaminating their purity, showing that, in *quasi-transcendental* fash-

17 Jacques Derrida, 'Positions: Interview with Jean-Louis Houdebine and Guy Scarpetta', in *Positions,* trans. Alan Bass (The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 41.

18 Emmanuel Levinas, 'Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity', in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987), 47–55.

ion, each pole of the hierarchy contains its opposite as a condition of its possibility.[19] This necessary contaminating presence of an element of otherness within an identity can be called *trace*,[20] and the process of unveiling it – what we awkwardly named *critique of the critique* – is what we often gesture towards with the term *deconstruction*.[21]

This thesis aspires to offer a deconstructive reading of Kantian logocentric deontology. Upon announcing our intellectual aims, a persistent question echoes within us: why are we urged to attempt a deconstruction of Kant? This question, in turn, can be approached from two different angles: first, the object of our deconstructive reading, namely Kantian practical reason; and second, deconstruction itself as the quasi-method by which we engage with Kant's text(s). Regarding the first angle, we have already hinted at what makes our engagement with Kant unavoidable: Kant's approach to responsibility, subjectivity – to the extent that the former comprises the material of the latter – and intersubjectivity – insofar as our intersubjective commitments are founded on the fact of reason, the voice of the moral law within us – is a landmark in our thinking, shaping our perception of who we are and how we interact. This observation leads us to examine the second angle: why read Kant *deconstructively*? Paradoxical as it may seem, it is the 'Kantian' duty to emancipate subjectivity 'from her self-incurred immaturity' that inspires the deconstructive orientation of our approach. Whereas Kant strove through his critical projects to show that to be a subject means to be more than just a passive link in the causal chain, our ambition is an *ultra-defence of subjectivity*: to

19 On the contaminating function of the 'quasi-transcendental' structure, see Geoffrey Bennington, Jacques Derrida, *Derrida*, ed. and trans. Apostolos Lampropoulos and Eytychis Pyrovolakis (Nisos, 2018), 242–243, 258.

20 Ibid., 115.

21 We would be very hesitant to give a firm definition of deconstruction or make an ontological statement of the form 'Deconstruction is x', for it is precisely the very ontological presuppositions of such statements that provide one of deconstruction's enduring objects. As Derrida contends, deconstruction 'takes place' wherever there 'is' something. See Jacques Derrida, 'Letter to a Japanese Friend', trans. David Wood and Andrew Benjamin, in *Derrida and Différance*, ed. David Wood and Robert Bernasconi (Northwestern University Press, 1988), 1–5.

designate, in other words, that to be a subject, to be responsible and to relate to others, consists in much more than merely encountering the voice of the moral law within one's breast.

If a text's destiny is to weave bonds – the term derives etymologically from the Latin verb 'texere', meaning 'to weave' – this text's goal is precisely to *trace* the bonds of the Kantian architectonic with the elements of Otherness it has persistently repressed, to pave the way for a ghostly return of the repressed Other, and pose those questions deemed crucial for liberating subjectivity from the shackles of logocentrism. Is it possible to conceive of morality and the ethical awakening of the self without a summons by a radically Other person? Shall we persist in the solid identity of a sovereign, autoposited subject, or can we trace within the sphere of the same an *always already* presence of the Other, which both locates and dislocates identity in terms of a double bind? If the self is indeed always already haunted by the fact of the Other's ghostly presence, how does this fact influence intersubjectivity and the legislation of the fundamental principles mediating the construction of the political community? These are the fundamental questions that we will address, mainly drawing inspiration from the ethical work of Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida. Taking deconstruction as a gesture of respect towards its object – respect deriving from the Latin 'respicere', meaning 'to look back' or 'to regard', and thus to investigate what lies behind something's apparent intentions – our first step towards uncovering the unintentional possibilities within the Kantian moral system will be to reconstruct its fundamental tenets.