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Ghostwriting: The Alkimos and its Ghosts

By Phillip Roe

To be read with the
new media artwork
"Ghostwriting"

The *Alkimos* story is a ghost story. ... But who believes in ghosts?

(Sue 3)

I believe on the contrary that the future belongs to ghosts, and that modern image technology, cinema, telecommunications, etc., are only increasing the power of ghosts.

(Jacques Derrida in Bennington & Derrida 349)

...everyone reads, acts, writes with his or her ghosts, even when one goes after the ghosts of the other

(Derrida *Specters* 139)

The *George M Shriver* was launched in 1943 as a liberty ship, a prefabricated wartime freighter destined for the Atlantic convoys. It was immediately leased to Norwegian interests and renamed the *Viggo Hansteen*, in 1953 it became the *Alkimos* and sailed under a Costa Rican flag until 1959 when under the same name became Greek registered.

In 1963 the *Alkimos* ran aground several times along the coast of Western Australia, beginning on a reef off Beagle Island 240 kilometres north of Perth on March 20 and, via Fremantle harbour, finally stranding itself just 56 kilometres north of Perth near Quinns Rocks. This was only the final act in a 20 year career from its launch in October 1943 – a career marked by its signature of mishap, and finally embedded not just on the reef it now stands as part of, but also in maritime mythology as a jinxed ship. Under more than one of its names, it ran aground numerous times – a trajectory always propelling it towards its grounding, and yet always fleeing the scene, moving on as though eternally fleeing from something within itself. Early in 1944, after steaming through an Atlantic convoy unscathed whilst ships around it went down, it beached itself on an uncharted reef (Sue 5). On the 24th of April 1952 it went aground in New Zealand, north of Moeraki (NZNMM). It went aground at least a further three times off the WA coast, having pursued an itinerant passage from reef to reef, never settling down – a narrative of unconscious desire

attempting to ground itself in the landscape.

Many strange incidents and events have contributed to this sense of the jinxed ship, of murders onboard and, in particular, there is a long history of the ghost which haunts the *Alkimos* – a subject of much speculation over many years. This ghost has been most explicitly detailed in the *Ghost of the Alkimos* by Jack and Barry Sue – book one of which is itself, paradoxically, ghostwritten (by John Nairn).

This article is an accompaniment to the new media artwork titled *Ghostwriting* – the primary task of the article is to open out some of the concepts and thinking that went into this production. *Ghostwriting* is a work that emerges from my intermittent yet ongoing fascination with the *Alkimos*, its “ghost”, and with the idea of the ghost and ghosting through the writings of Jacques Derrida. The sense of the ghost emerges as a figure which inhabits and disrupts the margins, the ambiguous in-between place of the ghost on the margins of the Australian continent. [1] It is a question of what the sense of the ghost recalls for us, of what a ghost of *Alkimos* would say to us of ourselves in its simultaneous being-there / not-being-there. What is the necessity of this ghost? Let us also note at the outset that we are not concerned with assessing claims as to the veracity of this ghost, to pursue it as if it were a thing in itself that could be proven or disproven, and hence to be done with it.

The wrecking of the *Alkimos* was a dramatic event, or series of dramatic events for Perth in 1963. Even as a 10 year old growing up in semi-rural Perth I was acutely aware of this drama enacted daily in the local press, with front page images of the ship going aground in the local newspaper *The West Australian*. Families made day trips to see this drama first hand – exciting stuff for a 10 year old, and many of the media images from this time have endured in my memory. From the very beginning this was a media and mediated event, as were the many other stories concerning the *Alkimos* over the years since. Stories of the ghost also began to emerge over the years. The *Alkimos* and its stories gradually faded from my memory, only to be revived intermittently through occasional media stories, usually concerning the skindiver Jack Sue, the ghost (which had somehow acquired the name “Henry”), the experiences of caretakers on the wreck and so on.

The *Alkimos* story returned to my consciousness through a conjunction of events in the early 1990s. Firstly my aunt acquired a beach cottage at Quinns Rocks which I visited quite often for periods of quiet reading and contemplation early in my postgraduate research. I was reading Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* in Quinns Rocks at the same time I was reacquainting myself with the *Alkimos* wreck which was visible from the foreshore. Late nights with *Specters* looking out over the expanses of the Indian ocean led me through the idea of the ghost and ghosting, the meaning of the ghost of *Alkimos*, and the (mediated) production of this ghost – a heady mix of ideas on writing, ghosts and haunted structures. The *Alkimos* was already mediating or haunting my reading. In 1995, I took a series of photographs of the *Alkimos* from my brother’s boat, the surviving images of which, following various image editing treatments, now form the basis of the imagery of the *Ghostwriting* text.

Ghostwriting is an engagement with the idea of the ghost figured through the *Alkimos* and its “ghost”, through Derrida’s hauntology, and with haunted structures generally, particularly that of writing. It is also to some extent a figuring of the place of the ghost amidst Western rationalist discourses through disruptions of its borders and framing, through occupying the in-between spaces, spectral spaces – the ghost is always there / not there, always yet to arrive.

It may be helpful here to outline the sense of the ghost as it is derived from Derrida. The notion of the ghost and ghosting in Derrida asserts the ghost is brought into being as soon as a thing becomes thing – that is, delineated as this, not that, setting itself apart a thing in the world and therefore establishing the binary structure of (it)self and other. As soon as thing becomes thing and hence potentially repeatable – “substitution, exchangeability, iterability, the loss of singularity as the experience of singularity itself, the possibility of capital” (*Specters* 161) – it

maintains itself with some ghost. This is the case for all binaries, Derrida's "hauntology" asserts that "What happens between two, and between all the "two's" one likes, such as between life and death, can only maintain itself with some ghost, can only talk with or about some ghost" even if this spectral which "is neither substance, nor presence, nor existence, is never present as such" (*Specters* xviii). Jonathan Marshall provides a readily accessible formulation of this idea, that

All polarity categories, such as male and female, may delete "the other pole". Suppose, for instance, there are two groups A and B, and members of A define a polarity such that A is positive and B is negative. By default B becomes defined as not-A. However as "events/things" are rarely logical opposites (i.e. women are not logical opposites of men, or vice versa), B becomes "illusory" or "spectral" to A. But as A becomes set off, or defined, by being not-B (ie not-not-A) A becomes a negation of an illusion. (Marshall)

In this spectral doubling ('a negation of an illusion'), the ghost inhabits (haunts) all concepts and, especially, to maintain itself with its own ghost. *Specters of Marx* is all about living with ghosts, it begins and ends with this exhortation to live with ghosts. For Derrida, the spectral is the figure of what is there by not being there, and the ghost in general consists in "autonomizing a representation and in forgetting its genesis as well as its real grounding" (*Specters* 171).

Ghostwriting attempts to explore this question of representation, with the place and time of its images cast within and as its web of writing. The *Alkimos* as does the ghost, upsets all calculations, always occupies the in-between space of the border and the frame, a spectral space in which it both produces and resists its own ghost(ing). Ghostwriting, by definition, is always writing in another name, in the name of an other, its own spectre – and also by definition, an other who will take the credit.

What remained with me over several years was my sense of fascination with the mythology of the *Alkimos* and my desire to explore the *Alkimos* story beyond the already existing and conventionalised histories of the *Alkimos* and its ghost. In particular, this concerns how these narratives are mediated within an Australian context, colonial discourses of conquest of an alien land, and how this context is unacknowledged in its mythic production. The *Alkimos* also comes to stand in for other broader discourses – as (a) representative of imperial Western rationalist discourses (colonial, military, maritime, technological – the other of this landscape). It reaches its limit point stranded on the border (cultural, figural, physical), the coastline.

Whereas colonial discourses have projected themselves over the landscape in mythic form, as the unknowable other of this "timeless land" – explored wonderfully in, for example, Ross Gibson's *Camera Natura* – the *Alkimos* now inhabits the margins of the Australian coastline, a silent sentinel, a ghost of itself and ghosting the adjacent landscape – and like the ghost, it never fully arrives. In *Camera Natura*, the focus is on the gaze as it projects onto the land (posing the question of what looks back at you – whereas the formulation for the ghost in terms of the gaze is that which does not recognise itself in a mirror) and on speed as though if it goes fast enough it can conquer all. But the *Alkimos* is lodged immovably and slowly decaying on the margin, confronted with the impossible possibility of closing its discursive net fully over the landscape. Unable to move, its ghost exceeds it, constantly fleeing the scene as the *Alkimos* has done throughout its "life". This figure haunts this landscape with its unbecoming spectral presence. Whilst the *Alkimos* is blind and immovable, the ghost is what allows movement and visibility. The ghost inaugurates a reversal of the gaze, the spectre is "among other things, what one imagines, what one thinks one sees and which one projects – on an imaginary screen where there is nothing to see" (*Specters* 100-1). The spectre sees us first of all, from "the other side of the eye, visor-effect, it looks at us even before we see it or even before we see period" (101).

All these discourses could be said to exist, spectrally – ghostwritten within the intersecting narratives of the *Alkimos* story. We could tally up this ghost, allow it to accumulate, to gradually

accrete in this rusting hulk. In this ongoing accumulation we can speak endlessly of this ghost – but we would want to speak *to* or *with* it as Derrida would press us towards since one can never be done with the ghost – “*Thou art a scholar, speak to it, Horatio*” (176).

These ghosts proliferate, each ghost ghosted by other ghosts, having no proper place and no proper name. The book *Ghost of the Alkimos* produces its ghosts while being ghostwritten. The proper names it produces also become spectral, explaining the first proper name in this way:

George Stanley McGovern, born 1922, was the United States Presidential Nominee in 1972. Standing for Vice-president with McGovern was his friend and advisor, Sargent Shriver.

They were defeated by Richard M Nixon, and Spiro T Agnew.

Liberty ship, George M Shriver, is a combination of the names: George McGovern and Sargent Shriver. (Sue, 14)

Given that McGovern would have been aged 20 when this ship was named, this explanation would appear to be retrospective, a ghost name in place of a proper name. A more plausible but equally spectral explanation for this naming can be found via a *Maryland Historical Society* notation.

George M. Shriver (died 1942) was married to Elizabeth Chism Shriver (died 1935) and lived in Baltimore, Maryland. George worked for the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, Co. where he served as Vice President until his death. (Maryland Historical Society).

All this would be part of the ghostly structure of the mythic production of the ghost of *Alkimos*. The second proper name came from another spectre – *Viggo Hansteen*, a Norwegian lawyer who was executed by the Nazis in 1941. We will not further count the ghost here, but rather allow this mythic accretion in *Ghostwriting*, and only gesture towards it here by noting the Western Australian Museum’s entry for the *Alkimos* – the ghost is not figured specifically in the Museum’s entry as it could never admit the (im)propriety of the ghost – nonetheless, it does gesture towards the ghost in the series of phrases it uses – “ill-fated Greek freighter”, “mishap”, “tragic train of events”, “bizarre and ghostly events”, and so on – although essentially attributing the genesis of these stories to the media (Shipwrecks). Certainly the media was fascinated, WA’s Channel 9 serialised a documentary on the *Alkimos* – “of the ship’s history and current happenings” – but this apparently gave some children nightmares and, after several parental protest letters, the show was temporarily withdrawn (Sue 16). Sue also reports ATN7s episode of “The Extraordinary” during the 1990s about Australian ghost stories and featuring the *Alkimos* (Sue 45, 64)

The *Ghostwriting* text is a new media art form, and its production in this mode is because it offers something else to the impulse of this project than is available in more traditional forms – such as a more static display of the photographic images interspersed with elements of written text. Digital and multimedia modes are often more experiential and temporal, and the new media art forms treatment of the still image can have the capacity to disrupt the temporality of 2D imagery in the photographic tradition.

This was a significant consideration as the *Alkimos* photographs I had taken in 1995 refused or at least resisted the excess of this temporality. It was this sense of excess that interested me most – the ghost effect as that which exceeds the (still) image in its materiality. In terms of this sense of temporality and movement, video footage would not have sufficed either, the ghost effect would have to emerge between the still image and the temporal continuity of the video image. The ghost would emerge from between the immobility of the *Alkimos* stranded on the margins and the spectral movement of the (in)visible temporality of the ghost, and between the decaying figure of the *Alkimos* and the decaying pixelations of the images. I had always felt that in the existing

accounts of the ghost of *Alkimos* something had escaped or fled the scene, just as the *Alkimos* has always attempted to flee the scene in its itinerant passage from reef to reef, something that even the writing in light that constituted the photographs taken from my brother's boat in daylight remained silent about. My images presented me with the closed frame of an already there – simply a series of photographs of a shipwreck.

I was acutely conscious that all this was somehow a question of writing – of writings whose mediations circumnavigated what remained to be said, attempts to pursue the ghost, to exorcise it and be done with it. Even my photographs tended to gloss a surface, overlaying and mediating what might remain – the inadmissible other of itself, its own spectre. Not that I am suggesting the possibility of an unmediated writing, rather, a writing *with* the ghost.

Ghostwriting, as a new media artwork, attempts to open the discursive relations of the text/material to other readings, to different readings via the sensible – specifically, to an other sensible access than what can be found in more conventional discursive accounts of the *Alkimos*, its history, the history of its ghost. The relations of image, sound and text in new media form, particularly through, for example, looping of sounds and pathways allows the sensible to return to itself in different configurations and in ways that are not available in more purely discursive forms. It is this sensible that we access through the figure of the ghost through its continual return to us from the future – never quite there, and ever immanent, it cannot be consigned safely to the past but insists and subsists undecidably between the always present and always just arriving.

Ghostwriting is not an attempt at capture, rather, it is an attempt at a conversation with the ghost – the haunted structure of western imperialism and colonial ambition embodied in this rusting hulk. This is a rich archive, and the ghost, like the archive, concerns a relation to the future – the ghost never quite arrives, always an event to come, a history of trajectories and projections across time and space that imprint themselves into the future to a somewhere and somewhen that they do not know, for destinations they can never reach.

Ghostwriting is ghostwritten by a number of discourses, many of them noted in passing here, and as for its composition, its author(ity), I'm (merely) another ghostwriter who enjoys his work.

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Endnotes

[1] Whilst the question of regionalism is not explored in a sustained or direct way here, this should be understood in the context of the kind of 'critical regionalism' explicated, for example, by Warwick Mules in "The Edges of the Earth: Critical Regionalism as an Aesthetics of the Singular".

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