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Différance, Authenticity and Hauntology in Todd Haynes’ I’m Not There

Credits appear on a black screen accompanied by an assortment of musical sounds — casual snare drum rolls, random guitar chords, notes from a fairground organ. These are mixed with the muted roar of a restless and expectant concert audience. Snap from black to a jerky image of a dressing-room table covered with debris, rendered in grainy black and white film stock. The handheld camera lingers on the table long enough for the viewer to register a couple of dirty ashtrays, an almost empty wine glass, and other sundry items, before a whip pan moves up to focus on a genial middle-aged man in a formal black suit. He stares deferentially at the camera, which is now obviously providing a first person point-of-view, standing in for an unseen personage, presumably a representation of Bob Dylan.

Something is happening here, but do we know what it is? We can’t answer this question definitively, but We’d like to slow things down by hitting the pause button on our remote control, and drawing your attention to a few things that give us pause for thought. Of course, our analysis of the film will be threadbare, and reductive compared to the surfeit of potential meanings disseminated by the film, but such is the necessary violence of commentary.

The amiable gent gestures directly, invitingly at the camera. Who is he addressing? We’ve paid to see a film about Bob Dylan, so presumably most viewers accept the first-person conceit as a method of representing the absent
protagonist. However, there is also a sense in which we, the audience, are being addressed. We are invited to follow a path. Our gaze is aligned with the camera, so we adopt the point of view of the illustrious 'I' who is not there. The camera’s first person point-of-view gives the audience an opportunity to experience how it feels to be backstage before performing in front of a large, rowdy audience; to stand in front of the crowd, to feel the anxiety of performance, the weight of expectation. How does it feel to be on your own, with no direction home? Perhaps we will have more of an idea after we’ve accepted the film’s invitation to embark on a journey through Haynes’ apparently unusual biopic.

Let’s proceed slowly; the man gestures, with an almost theatrical wave, for ‘Dylan’ to move towards the source of the noise — it’s show time. ‘Dylan’ moves from the bright light of the dressing room, passing various backstage staff and hangers-on, to a dim stairwell, where another man, a younger man, waves him up several short flights of stairs and finally onto the stage. This backstage vignette is filmed in the style of D.A. Pennebaker’s classic cinéma vérité documentary of Dylan’s 1965 British tour, Don’t Look Back. The sounds introduced earlier have gradually built to a crescendo, mutating from an indistinct background din to a frenzied cacophony of fervent screams, wild whistles, and feral applause. We catch a glimpse of a large American flag acting as a backdrop for the band whose indistinct outlines come into view through a haze of cigarette smoke and the dizzying glare of stage lights.

What does this American flag signify? Remember, the flag belongs to a nation whose values are enshrined in the Gettysburg Address, the Declaration of
Independence' and echoed in Dr Martin Luther King's 'I have a dream speech'; but its also the flag of a nation reviled for its literal and cultural imperialism — a flag that represents rampant capitalism, aggressive militarism and vulgar consumerism. Dylan fans will know that he unfurled the flag as a stage prop during the second half of his concert at the Paris Olympia on his infamous 1966 world tour, a tour notable for significant portions of audience expressing their disapproval of Dylan's electric music by loudly booing him when he performed with a band. These erstwhile fans felt their hero's new songs displaced an authentic cultural tradition with a trivial form of commercial popular culture (of which we will say more later). Clinton Heylin, among others, interprets the flag draping in Paris as a pre-emptive strike against a hostile crowd and as an especially provocative gesture given America's involvement in the Vietnam War. The Parisian crowd, some of whom possibly participated in the events of May 1968, shouted their disapproval, exhorting Dylan to 'get rid of the flag' and 'go home'.

But what does the flag represent in the context of Haynes' film? Is it an unapologetic symbol of nationalistic arrogance? Might the flag be a signifier of a tradition, a reference to what Greil Marcus calls 'the weird old America', a conflicted community, a contradictory community, a ghostly, contaminated community characterised by diversity, but united by an adherence to democratic values, and a belief in freedom? Does the significance of the flag change with the music performed in front of it? What was Dylan thinking? What was he trying to

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say? This is American music? I am proudly American? Once again, the answers to these questions, like so many things in the film, are undecidable.

The flag is both a spatial and temporal marker. If we read the images historically, the 'here' is the Olympia theatre Paris, and the 'when' is 1966, so the camera moves up the stairs from 1965 onto a stage in a different city in 1966. But is soon becomes apparent that the film is unconcerned with history or fidelity to the facts of Dylan's biography.

Then, an abrupt cut to two rapid close-ups — a leather boot pressing down on the machine's kick-starter followed by a gloved hand gripping the clutch of a motorcycle — as the roar of the crowd morphs into the roar of a motorcycle engine.

Here's another moment of recognition for the Dylanologist. Most people know his tumultuous 1966 world tour was abruptly cancelled when he apparently had a motorcycle accident near his home in Woodstock. His manic, amphetamine fuelled antics threatened to send him to an early grave, and the accident, apocryphal or not, was a pretext for escaping the madding crowd. Dylan survived the accident, and reinvented himself by producing a series of records that drew on the older traditions of rural Americana before adopting and casting aside several musical styles and public personae. The 1966 tour and the motorcycle accident are pivotal moments in the established narrative of Dylan's life. Martin Scorsese's documentary keeps cutting back to footage of the 1966 tour as it narrates Dylan's life, chronologically, up until the 1966 accident. Here, then, is an incident from Dylan's life that's well known, but, like so many things in Dylan's
life and Haynes’ film, unverifiable as fact (despite Dylan’s unwavering insistence that the accident occurred). But at least it gives us something to hang on to. It literally kick starts the film by dramatising a well known biographical fact.

Several permutations of the film’s title fade in and out over a wide shot of the motorcycle moving from left to right across the screen:

I
I
he
he
I’m
he
I’m
I’m
her
not her
not here
I’m not there.

The titles dominate the frame while the rider appears a mere speck in the background. Just before the motorbike reaches the right hand the border of the frame the film’s full title appears: I’m Not There.

So, who’s not there? Why, Bob Dylan, of course, but his is not the only absence. Nobody literally appears as a corporeal presence in films, but there is, as we shall see shortly, another sense in which the ‘I’ is always absent. What to make of the illusive ‘I’ in the film’s title? Why not name the movie after Dylan, or one of his iconic hits, instead of an obscure song, ‘I'm Not There’, that was never officially released (until it appeared on the soundtrack of Haynes’ film)? Perhaps Haynes is interested in exploring the paradoxes of identity? The stammering titles that fade in and out before spelling the film’s title draw attention to the ambiguity of
the 'I'. Is the 'I' a 'she' or 'he'? Perhaps identity something akin to negative theology — 'I' is 'not her'? And if the 'I' is not 'here' or 'there' than 'where'?

Dylan's interest in the question of identity is well documented by his biographers and critics. Aidan Day observed that the 'issue of identity constitutes a primary imaginative focus [...] it is the specific preoccupation of a large proportion of the lyrics and it recurs as a consideration throughout the wide range of distinguishable subjects that are canvassed in the verse.'2 Haynes, too, draws attention to the elusive 'I' in a variety of ways. Ben Wishaw's incarnation of the bard in the film is named Arthur, after the French Symbolist poet, Arthur Rimbaud, famously remarked 'je est un autre' ('I is another'). Dylan himself notes the Rimbaud's influence in the first volume of his autobiography:

Someplace along the line Suze had also introduced me to the poetry of French Symbolist poet Arthur Rimbaud. That was a big deal, too. I came across one of his letters called "Je est un autre," which translates into "I is someone else" When I read these words the bells went off. It made perfect sense. I wish someone would have mentioned that to me earlier.3

What does it mean to say 'I' is another? The 'I' is a stranger? The 'I' is inaccessible'? The 'I' is mutable and unknowable?

Bang — the sound of a crash? Snap to an image of a dead body lying on a hospital trolley in a mortuary — a mop of tousled hair frames the top two-thirds of a youthful face. Perhaps the sound that accompanied the cut was the whoosh of a

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sheet being whipped off the dead figure? More likely, it is the sound of a photographer’s flash bulb documenting the celebrity life to the very end. The mouth of the deceased is not visible, but his or her eyes are closed. An unseen narrator intones the following speech as medical examiners stand around the corpse before dissecting the body by making an incision into his flesh with a scalpel:

There he lies. God rest his soul, and his rudeness. A devouring public can now share the remains of his sickness, and his phone numbers.

Who or what has killed the figure on the mortuary table? From what sickness did he suffer? We know Dylan did not die in the motorcycle accident, so the film confounds any expectation that it will follow Dylan’s biography. Is this death symbolic? An as yet unrealised possibility, perhaps? The corpse leaves behind the remainders of his sickness — his art and the mundane detritus of everyday life— for the public to devour and interpret.

As each assignation is named a corresponding image of the actor who will portray that particular aspect of Dylan’s identity appears. So, the one figure contains multiple identities and potentialities.
The narrative voice continues as the doctors confer — their lips moving out of synch with the voice. It is unclear whether they are engaged in a conspiratorial dialogue with each other, or whether they are voicing the dialogue we hear on the soundtrack.

Nailed by a peeping Tom
Who would soon discover...

As one of the doctors touches the tightly framed hands of the corpse the voice-over changes tone, and we hear Cate Blanchett’s imitation of Dylan’s mid-western drawl:

A poem is like a naked person.

Cut back to a shot of Blanchett’s Dylan, now wearing sunglasses, and lying in an open coffin, which is framed horizontally to occupy the entire screen. The narrative voice continues:

Even the ghost was more than one person.

The ghost? Let’s stop for a moment and consider what we’ve learned so far. First, Haynes blurs the distinction between fact and fiction — Dylan didn’t die in a motorcycle accident in 1966, but as we soon learn, the film is only ‘inspired by the music and many lives of Bob Dylan.’ The figure in the coffin who bears a close resemblance to the Bob Dylan of 1966 goes by several generic names — the poet, the fake, and so on. Haynes does not identify the character with the proper name Bob Dylan. He conflates incidents — details from the 1965 British tour are combined with the 1966 Paris concert. Most importantly the status of the ‘I’ is
questioned. And even the ghost is more than one person. So what is Haynes attempting to say? Dennis Bingham observes that

In order to make a film about Dylan, Haynes makes *like* him, juxtaposing unconnected images, music styles, era, influences, song lyrics, incidents in Dylan's life, film allusions, and in just one case a music video (of "Ballad of a Thin Man") with varying interpretations. For Haynes, therefore, Dylan is, or rather, Dylan means fictions, masks, and personae, each of them, in a grand paradox, genuine.⁴

For Bingham, Haynes produces a postmodernist biopic by celebrating, mimicking and foregrounding Dylan's stylistic transformations, and different personae while both observing and unsettling the genre's conventions. This is a perfectly reasonable way to read *I'm Not There*. However, rather than analyse the film in terms of genre, or postmodernism, I want to read the film philosophically with reference to what Jacques Derrida calls hauntology.

Before engaging with Hauntology, I think it is important to emphasise that Derrida provides an alternative way of understanding the status of the 'I' — the absent presence that is 'there' and 'not there' in Haynes' film. If we follow Derrida, the 'I' is not merely a series of personae but a form of self-differing best understood by the neologism *différance*. *Différance* is the condition of possibility for all being. The 'I', for Derrida, is never present to itself, for the 'I' what it is by virtue of what it is not. Moreover, the 'I' is not only different from its self, but its being is always deferred. Who the 'I' is in the future cannot be decided now. So, let us return to the figure of the 'ghost', which we must consider in the plural if

we are to remain faithful to Derrida's hauntology and hear the political tone of Haynes' film and Dylan's songs more clearly.

**Hauntology**

There are spectres haunting *I'm Not There* — most obviously, the spectres of Bob Dylan's many personas. The earnest folksinger, the mischievous tramp, the indulgent rock star, the fire and brimstone preacher, the bohemian poet, the country crooner, and the tortured bluesman all manifest as blithe spirits, flickering in and out of view over the course of the film's 135 minutes. But *I'm Not There* also invokes less discernible but equally influential spectres in the shape of Rimbaud, Verlaine, Ginsberg, and the beat poets. Perhaps most significantly, it conjures the ghosts of the 'Weird Old America,' for Bob Dylan's art ventriloquises the eerie moans of African slaves that seep through the Mississippi Delta blues, the ethereal high lonesome wails of Celtic immigrants ensconced in remote Appalachian mountains, the home-spun wisdom of hillbilly bards tormented by the vicissitudes of love and loss. If you listen closely to his more recent albums you may even discern the forlorn timbre of urban jazz singers taking solace in melancholy torch songs, as well as the hoarse strains of demented elves delivering a bewildering dose of Christmas cheer. All these figures populate, to greater or lesser extents, Dylan's imaginative world, and, by extension Haynes' film; they co-exist in what we might describe, after Greil Marcus, an invisible republic⁵ — a virtual space occupied by motley collection of eccentrics and renegades who testify to the power of contagion and contamination.

⁵ Marcus uses the term to describe the influences on Dylan and the Band's Basement Tapes recordings in his 1997 book *Invisible Republic* that was later republished as *The Weird Old America* in 2001. See Greil Marcus, *Invisible Republic: Bob Dylan's Basement Tapes* [
The film is named after one of the most enigmatic and mythologised songs in Dylan’s canon. Greil Marcus, in his book, *The Invisible Republic* (1997), argues that the music recorded by Dylan and The Band in the wake of Dylan’s supposed motorcycle accident (which Haynes dramatises in his film’s title sequence) conjures a ghostly community of assorted oddballs and eccentrics who embody the values of what he calls the ‘weird old America’ — a virtual America community first assembled in Harry Smith’s famous *Anthology of American Folk Music*, a legendary collection of disparate recordings that became the Bible for the folk music revival that launched Dylan’s career. Marcus suggests that Dylan conversed the ‘invisible republic’ of Smith’s anthology.

What they took out of the air were ghosts — and it’s an obvious thing to say. For thirty years people have listened to the basement tapes as palavers with a community of ghosts — or even, in certain moments, as the palavers of a community of ghosts. Their presence is undeniable; to most it is also an abstraction, at best a vague tourism of spectres from a foreign country.6

In other words, the songs on the Basement Tapes communicate with the past, the dead — more importantly, for Marcus they pull the ‘Weird Old America’ out of time, and make the spirit of the invisible republic inhabit the songs of the Basement Tapes.7

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7 The Basement Tapes period is most obviously represented in Richard Gere’s scenes. Gere plays Billy the ‘Lone Gun’ (a character that makes reference to Dylan’s Basement Tapes period as well as his appearance in Sam Pekinah’s film *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* (1973). The Weird Old America is made manifest in its *mise-en-scene* (which makes full use of the iconography of the Western genre).
Marcus reinforces his reading of the song by quoting the composer Michael Pisaro’s analysis of Dylan’s creative process. Pisaro claims that Dylan has ‘discovered a language or, better, has heard of a language: heard about some of its vocabulary, its grammar and its sounds, and before he can comprehend it, starts using this set of unformed tools to narrate the most important event of his life.’ Whatever emotional power the song possesses lies in the grain of Dylan’s voice, and his trance like delivery, which manages to make obscure and ungrammatical verses sound transcendent.

And I’m also hesitating by temptation lest it runs
Which it don’t follow me
But I’m not there, I’m gone

The words on the page do not make much sense, but Marcus’ commentary suggests that Dylan functions as a kind of medium when he sings ‘I’m Not There’ — it is as though he is channelling a voice from Smith’s invisible republic, and is not really in control of his performance. This may or not be the case, and it is impossible to settle the matter objectively, and this is almost beside the point.

The song’s significance for us, and for Haynes’ cinematic translation of Dylan’s ‘lives’ into film lies in what Marcus describes as its conversation with the ghosts that inhabit the songs of basement tapes, for the film I’m Not There is an extended conversation with various aspects of Dylan’s cultural heritage.

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8 Michael Pisaro quoted in Marcus, p. 200.
I'm Not There is an extended conversation with various ghosts. Indeed, the film's fractured temporality coupled with the myriad of spectral voices that weave in and out of its many worlds is perhaps best understood with reference to Jacques Derrida's concept of 'hauntology', a neologism he coins in his book Specters of Marx.9 Like all Derridean neologisms, hauntology is a critique of Western philosophy's metaphysics of presence. That is, its obsession with origins and presence, which, in the words of Carolyn D'Cruz privileges 'the material over the ideal, the actual over the virtual, being over consciousness, the empirical over the transcendental, the concrete over the abstract, action over thought, and so on.'10 The logic of 'hauntology'

disrupts our distinctions between the living and the dead, the actual and the inactual, being and non-being, and so on. In short, the ghost troubles the security of negotiating decisions—political, philosophical, or otherwise—in terms of the living present. This is to say the figure of the ghost forces us to deal with what Derrida calls the 'virtual space of spectrality': a space that can never be fully present to itself, which in turn does not mean that we are then marking a space of total absence. That is presence and absence do not operate as simple opposites to one another within the logic of the ghost. This prompts us to think of the here and now as occurring within a time and space that is dis-adjusted with itself. As an apparition, the ghost is neither here nor there, neither then nor now, marking its absent presence in more and less than one place and time.11

The spatial and temporal logic of I'm Not There is also dis-adjusted with itself, and it presents Dylan as a biographical subject that is an absent presence, a conglomeration of spectres that are 'neither here nor there, neither then nor now.' The film refuses to pin Dylan, or provide any definitive 'truth' about Dylan

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10 Carolyn D'Cruz, 'Adjusting the Tone of Marxism: A Hauntological Promise for Ghosts of Communism in a Democracy-to-come' Contretemps 6, January 2006, p.
11 D'Cruz, p. 66.
or his art because the most intriguing thing about Dylan's work (and by
extension Haynes' film, which largely succeeds in being faithful to the spirit of
Dylan’s songs) is that they defer to the spectres that haunt American popular
culture — spectres that speak the language of liberty, a language that is often
debased in contemporary culture. The logic of ‘hauntology’ compels us to take
responsibility for the heritage of the Weird Old America, and consider how
the ‘I’ must remain open to possibility in order to hear the ‘chimes of freedom
flashing’.

Dylan’s songs and Haynes’ film pose a challenge not only to the traditional
conception of self that is often reinforced by the biopic, but to all forms of
biographical discourse that ignore these ghostly voices and their ‘chimes of
freedom’. The first major sequence of I'm Not There, shows the young romantic,
Marcus Carl Franklin’s, Woody, who obviously references the young Dylan’s
obsession with Woody Guthrie, conversing with a couple of hobos in a boxcar. He
pulls out his guitar and plays his fellow travellers a tune. The camera lingers on
the words written on Woody’s guitar case, ‘This Machine Kills Fascists'.¹² Later in
the penultimate scene of the film, Richard Gere’s Billy the Kid, hops on another
freight train, perhaps the same train, and finds Woody’s guitar, for time is out of
joint here, and wipes away the dust encrusted case, and ponders the meaning of
the phrase now unconcealed by the dust, ‘This Machine Kills Fascists’. And if
fascism is about the totalitarian impulse to control every aspect of an individual’s

¹² Woody Guthrie, the legendary dust bowl balladeer, and left wing political activist who
inspired the young Bob Dylan, actually wrote this phrase on his guitar.
life, to fix identity in the image of the state, and to destroy individual liberty, then maybe *I'm Not There* really kills fascists.

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