If you ask a Mongolian herder what a “ghost” (süns, chötgör) is, his first answer might well be that he has no idea, because he has never encountered one. He might also add that you should stop believing everything you are told, and that most of the things you might have heard on this topic are mere “lies” (hudal). The ruthless repression of the Buddhist clergy in the 1930s, and the promotion of Marxist-Leninist ideology throughout the country during the nearly seventy-year period after Mongolia became a popular republic under the aegis of the USSR in 1924, could account for some of the general skepticism expressed by the population today toward these phenomena, at least in rural areas.¹

If you insist for long enough, however, you might end up being told that “ghosts” are supposed to originate from the “souls” (süns) of people who “could not find a proper rebirth” (jinhene töröl oloogüi). The reason for this could be either that they remained attached to persons or things in this world or that funerary rituals were not performed properly—which eventually amounts to the same, as funerary rituals are meant to break any attachment the deceased may keep to their former environments (Delaplace 2009b). Alternatively, ghosts might be described as frustrated beings who died before they could fulfill their “desires” (taachal). At any rate, they are imagined to be extremely lonely creatures, craving sociability and trying to lure the ones they loved during life into joining them in death.

According to these ideas, ghosts are mere glitches in the cycle of reincarnations guaranteed by the Buddhist clergy, whereby people are to
be reborn as their own direct descendants, provided they—or their families—performed enough “good deeds” (bayan) to be spared a stay in one of the sixteen scorching or freezing hells (Sazykin 1979), or a vile rebirth as a flightless insect (Even 1999). Ritual specialists, Buddhist lamas or lay practitioners known as “skilled persons” (mergen hün), are expected to be able to subdue these ghosts by satisfying their frustrations, or by breaking the last bonds that tie them to this world.

This ontological definition of what a ghost is, however, fails to account for the various forms under which ghosts may be reported to manifest themselves, by people who claimed to have encountered them. Moreover, it overlooks the crucial clue contained in the doubt expressed by herd- ers on this issue, mentioned at the outset. Saying that we cannot know anything for sure about ghosts unless we have encountered one ourselves suggests that ghosts are first and foremost a matter of perception.

It is not only Mongolians who draw this close connection between knowledge and perception of ghosts; this has already been picked up by Pierre Déléage (2007; see also Taylor 1993) concerning the Amazonian Sharanahua, and it appears clearly too in many ethnographies concerned with ghosts and/or spirits, from Iceland (Pons 2002, 109) to Nepal (Schlemmer 2004, 115–22). One could argue that the intrinsic link between perception and knowledge also forms the plot of several Victorian literary ghost stories—ghosts are typically things about which a character’s opinion changes dramatically once he encounters one (e.g., see Conan Doyle’s famous novel *The Land of Mist*). It emerges even more strongly from the early spiritualist literature, where a “scientific” examination of phenomena related to the manifestation of ghosts relies almost entirely on the close inspection of what supposedly reliable witnesses experienced (Flammarion 1924).

In this chapter, I single out and analyze what specific sensation is recognized as an encounter with a ghost in Mongolia. I base this on a corpus of narratives collected from Dörvöd nomadic herders in northwestern Mongolia. In these narratives, the beings that appear to people are not always identified as the spirits of particular persons (what are called “revenants” in French, as opposed to “fantômes”). Sometimes they are indeed “souls” (süns) of young people, or of old ladies, coming back to haunt their relatives, but they are actually most often unidentified specters (called alternatively chötgör, güidel, oroolon) encountered in the open, without any indication of, or concern for, the “soul” they might originate from. Sometimes, it is even unclear in witnesses’ accounts whether the encountered entity is the soul of a human person, or of a nonhuman “land master” (gazryn ezen)—a spirit that dwells in a specific area and is held
responsible for such phenomena as weather, livestock health, or fortune in hunting. As we will also see, witnesses are not always eager to subdue the ghost by appealing to a ritual specialist: most often the apparition is carefully avoided and left to haunt the place where it was unwittingly encountered. Finally, the corporeal quality attributed to such entities varies greatly from one story to another, as well as across Mongolia. Whereas some “ghosts” (güidel) are likened to currents flowing through places (Delaplace 2011), “little humans” (Delaplace & Empson 2007) or “imps” (Swancutt 2008) with apparently full-fledged corporeality might also be reported to haunt houses.

Mongolian people use the broad category “invisible things” (üzegdehgüi yum) to refer collectively to all these entities. This expression echoes a point made, once again, by Pierre Déléage (2007): characterizing these things as “invisible” does not mean that nobody can ever see them—otherwise they would cause little trouble—but that their encounter is subject to a specific perceptual modality. In other words, they cannot be experienced in the same way as, for example, living people and cattle: rather than absolutely “invisible,” these “things” are perceivable only by some people, in certain contexts, and in a particular way.

Meanwhile, the anthropological literature on ghosts, especially the Anglophone literature, has tended to analyze them in relation to the sociohistorical context they arose in. Thus, ghosts have been famously studied as local responses to global capitalism (MacLellan 1991), or as mirrors of the changes occurring with the advent of consumer society (Kwon 2007, Kendall 2008). On the other hand, recent works have shown the importance of ghosts in the way people deal with their recent history (e.g., Mueggler 2001; Bear 2007; Kwon 2008). In contemporary Vietnam, for example, some households find themselves haunted by young soldiers who died far from home and without an appropriate burial. People’s experiences, in this context, are organized around the discovery of the ghost’s identity and life story, always tightly linked to the country’s traumatic history (Kwon 2008, 109–13). In contrast, Dörvöd herders do not seem to encounter ghosts related to their historical past. The history of Manchu colonization, the revolution, and the repressed uprisings that occurred precisely in this region in the 1920s (e.g., Bawden 1968, 266) have not been fodder for such experiences. Yet, the stories told by Dörvöd herders, as opposed to those I could collect in the capital city, Ulaanbaatar, for instance (Delaplace 2010), are primarily concerned with the way people dwell in places.

As mentioned at the outset of this paper, doubt is absolutely central
in these narratives. Not only is any story of an encounter with “invisible things” suspected to be a “lie,” but the perception through which the ghost appears to the senses of a witness is also ambiguous to himself or herself. As already shown elsewhere (Delaplace 2009, 249–55), the dimmer and more transient (i.e., the more uncertain) the perception, the more it will become credible to the audience as the manifestation of an “invisible thing.” The uncertain and ambiguous nature of these sensations is at the center of what makes them uncanny to witnesses. Furthermore, and at another level, I want to show that the uncertain perception recognized as a ghost casts doubts on human perception itself, shaking what Maurice Merleau-Ponty has called “perceptual faith” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 3). Mongolian ghost stories—and this probably applies outside of Mongolia too—seem to describe a swift disruption in the witness’s bodily engagement in the world by furtively disclosing an invisible dimension to it. Experiences of encounters with “invisible things” seem to give an uncanny hint that the world might not always be “what we see” (ibid.). On this basis, I will outline the specific regime of communication that corresponds to interactions with ghosts in Mongolia: that is, the peculiar perceptual modality according to which these entities are encountered.

Encountering the Invisible

In the course of my work with the Dörvöd of northwestern Mongolia, I have collected several stories of people who thought that they had encountered a “ghost” (süns, chötgör, güidel, oroolon, etc.). I recorded these narratives not only from people who were famous as storytellers in the region but also from anybody who would recount an experience. Most of the time, these narratives are presented as mere anecdotes and told in a matter-of-fact way; some are highly elaborate and detailed, others quite allusive, but all of them relate an experience interpreted as the manifestation of an “invisible thing.”

One of the most talented storytellers I have met is certainly Tselei. In 2004, she was a forty-year-old mother of three, and she was leading a seemingly quiet life herding sheep, goats, and yaks with her husband. However, she had had over the past three or four years quite a lot of experiences related to ghosts. My friend Gansüh, her brother, knew this and took me to her place to ask her to retell these experiences. Here is one of the first stories she chose to tell:
One night I was sleeping, and something like brushed and pulled on my leg. So I woke up with a start and thought that I must have changed my leg's position or something like that. And I went back to sleep. The following evening, a friend of mine was marrying his daughter. I went there and came back after midnight. My daughter was a baby at that time, and I was breast-feeding her. I put her to sleep. At our encampment there was Tsegmed, the ritual specialist, and his family, but Tsegmed had gone to the village. And then while I was sleeping, something, like that, right under the blanket, something like pulled my leg. So I woke up suddenly and I got really frightened, with all these weird things. I was lying on my bed thinking of an explanation for all this, and the baby who was on my belly—tschiss!—she burst out crying all of a sudden, in the middle of the night. So I rocked her in my arms, I tried to breast-feed her, but she refused. And my husband, he was sleeping! I was calling him but he wouldn't wake up!

“Wake up, wake up!” I called him.
“What happened?” he said, getting up
“Something pulled my leg!”
“What kind of bloody ghost could pull your leg?”

And here we go hat hatlag, arguing in the middle of the night. So I told my husband, “Go and find someone who knows and can!” He went out, and he came back with Tsegmed. Tsegmed took his rosary out. He examined it and said, “One of your very close friends died in the spring. This person's soul came back to you.” And indeed, when we were in Ulaangom [the administrative center of the province], it is true that we were with another family. One of them had died in the spring and this person's soul had come to us. So Tsegmed told me to take a notebook on which he put meat, fat, butter, flour, fritters, dry cheese, and sugar. He gave these things to me and read prayers. He put water in a bowl, added milk, and then he prayed again and again. Then he told me, “Walk twenty-one steps from your house. Put this on the ground and come back walking backward. Wash your hands and come back in.” I was very afraid so he told me, “If you hear a noise, don't be afraid!” I don't quite remember what happened. I took this thing out in the dark, I walked twenty-one steps, I put it on the ground, I went back walking backward, washed my hands, and then the paper sounded—sart! In the morning I woke up and went to see it. On the paper, the meat, the cheese, everything had disappeared. It is as if this man's soul had come, had fed on all this, and then had been expelled by the power of prayers.

Coming back a bit later to this same experience, Tselei commented that “souls come back to those whom they loved,” visibly moved by the touching attention, however desperate and gruesome, showed by this young neighbor of hers. This narrative recounts the progressive uncovering of
the ghost’s identity—from a doubted sensation to an invisible presence, eventually recognized as a named person. Interestingly, this is achieved through a strong dissociation between the perception of the ghost and its identification: whereas Tselei is indeed the main witness of the ghost’s manifestation, she appears to take no part in its designation as such, which is presented as the other characters’ doing.

To Mongol ears, the first assessment of the ghost’s presence is certainly the baby’s behavior. It is indeed generally believed in Mongolia that infants can feel the presence of invisible things, mostly ghosts, while grown-up persons cannot, and the presence of ghosts is a usual explanation for sudden and irrepressible cries from a newborn (Aubin 1975). Here, Tselei does not even draw any such conclusion herself but tries to wake up her sleepy and rather unconcerned husband. Now, even if the husband is being ironic, he is actually the first person to pronounce the word “ghost” (sûns), articulating what the baby had expressed through her behavior. The husband’s ironic comment is later confirmed by the diagnosis of Tsegmed, the ritual specialist, who not only identifies the manifestation as a ghost but also recognizes it as the spirit of a specific person. In this account, clearly, Tselei overlooks her own part in the ghost’s identification as her young neighbor. In fact, the ritual specialist only gives a clue—“one of your very close friends died in the spring”—on the basis of which Tselei infers that it must concern the young neighbor they had in Ulaangom. This last step, by which an actual event (the death of a person) is matched up with the specialist’s diagnosis (a dead person came back to you), is presented by Tselei as a logical conclusion rather than a personal opinion.

In contrast to the distance she takes toward the ghost’s identification, Tselei renders with great care and narrative skill the perceptual dimension of her experience. Her story, on the one hand, brings forth an evocative soundscape punctuated with powerful, or even loud, noises: the baby cries out in the night’s silence, with a sudden intensity rendered by the onomatopoeia tchiss; then the argument between the spouses rolls in with a thunder-like succession of roaring noises, hat hatlag. On the other hand, Tselei superimposes on this auditory background two sensory feelings, which stand out as uncommon. If they seem so, it is not that they are in any way stronger than the other perceptions described; on the contrary, they seem dimmer and swifter. They are described as feelings that are gone before they can be fully sensed: discreet sensations felt on the brink of sleep, and yet unmistakably real.

Tselei renders the particularity of this feeling using, beside the rather common verbs “to brush” (samna-) and “to pull” (tata-), the preposition
“like” (shig). It is to be noted that each time she evokes the manifestation of the ghost, she uses the same preposition: she does not say “something pulled my leg,” but “something like pulled my leg.” This word is rather common in Mongolian (Kullman and Tserenpil 1906, 287, 296, 311): added directly to a noun or a pronoun, it expresses a relation of similitude (cham shig neg hün, “a person like you”), and added to a verb, in the expression yum shig, it means “as if” (chi medeegüi yum shig, “as if you didn’t know”). Here, added directly after the verb compound, it seems to qualify the sensation as an uncertain one—it felt as if something had brushed and pulled her leg. But even more than this, by likening the sensation to what it could have been, Tselei makes the indirect statement that this is precisely not what the sensation was: it was similar to a feeling of brushing and pulling, but it was not quite that. It was something else.

Comparing the Incomparable

As a matter of fact, comparative devices are often found in Dörvöd ghost stories to describe the ghost’s manifestation. Here is an example, taken from another story told by Tselei:

At that time, I was only a child, [. . .] I was working in Tarialan’s hospital. One winter, one of our doctors was called for a patient [who was about to give birth] in Harhiraa mountains. She took me along with her, because I knew the way in Harhiraa. I was working at the nursery. So she took me along and we drove to the patient’s. I was showing her the way, and right below Türgen’s Har Üzüür, the car broke in the snow. So Jumdlaa the doctor and I were together and the night was falling. [. . .] We went uphill together. We were walking and suddenly a metallic jinger jinger starts following us closely. I was scared: “What’s happening? Something is following us!” I was very scared, and I walked in front of the doctor, I was scared. Then the doctor said, “Come on, my child, these are yaks with their bells passing by, these are fettered horses.” But I was really scared, I was a child. [. . .] We arrived at Batsüh’s [. . .] and [his wife] had already given birth. The doctor came in to examine the mother, and we were about to leave but it was pitch-dark outside. Going back to the car in the middle of the night scared me, and I said to Batsüh, “I won’t be able to walk there! We walked together before. I won’t be able to walk, please saddle up a horse!”

“I’ll saddle up a horse,” said Batsüh, and then he added jokingly, “All my yaks have bells. It’s their bells you’ve heard!”
So the doctor and I rode back to the car. And on our way back, Jumdlaa the doctor said [to the driver of the car], “How dark it is! And we’ve just encountered a ghost! I was scared, but the girl was scared too, so I pretended these were just fettered horses, cattle with their bells passing by.”

This is just. So I was only a child, and when I came home I tried to strike a piece of metal. But it was not the same sound coming out of this piece of metal. Very strange. *Jinger jinger*, a very soft metallic sound following us closely. Nothing visible. Nothing to be seen with the eyes.

The story features the same strict separation between identification and perception, although in this case it is another kind of specialist who is responsible for identifying the apparition. Jumdlaa, the elder woman with whom Tselei walks in the mountains at dusk, is not only a doctor but presumably also someone who is able to see ghosts plainly and fully. Contrary to Tsegmed, the ritual specialist of the previous narrative, she does not undertake to exorcise the ghost from the place it seems to haunt, neither does she even intend to “recognize” whose spirit it originates from. This does not even seem to be at stake here: the phenomenon is identified generically as “a ghost” (güits) by the doctor, who makes sure Tselei does not suffer the sudden “shock” (cochirol) that is supposed to be felt by people who come in direct contact with an apparition. The doctor thus lies, with the cunning complicity of the patient’s husband, in order to spare Tselei any kind of fright while they remain in this potentially dangerous situation.

While the composition—the plot, one might say—of the narrative is completely different from the first one, the way its sensory dimension is described seems quite comparable. In this story, a very distinctive sound (rendered by the onomatopoeia *jinger jinger*) stands out from a mostly visual background (the snowy mountains progressively immersed in darkness). The metallic sound interpreted as a ghost here is not as swift and uncertain as the sensation of the first narrative (it is “following” the witness), and yet, it is also rendered using an implicit analogy. In this case, the comparison is made without any comparative term. Still, the final sequence in which Tselei tries, and fails, to reproduce the metallic sound she heard using actual metal conveys the idea that what she heard sounded like metal, but not quite. In other words, it was a metallic sound that sounded like no existing metallic object. This is the way the straightforward comparison used to describe her first experience should also be interpreted: using the preposition “like” (shig), Tselei describes a feeling of brushing and pulling that resembled no brushing and pulling experience she had ever had. The
manifestation of invisible things is described in these stories as something absolutely singular, which can only be described in similitude to existing things.

Interestingly, Mongolian herders are not the only ones who resort to similes to describe the apparition of a ghost. The Kulung Rai of Nepal, as documented by Grégoire Schlemmer (2004), when recounting an alleged apparition, insist that it sounded “like a bell ringing,” “like the bell-belts worn by diviners,” or “like a drumming sound” (2004, 115, emphasis added). Even further in space and time, among the Cluniac monks of medieval Europe, Jean-Claude Schmitt (1994, 40) has reported the use of the adverb “quasi” in descriptions of apparitions. The same phenomenon has been noted by Emmanuel de Vienne (2010, 178) among the Amazonian Trumai, who use the word nawan, translated in French by the author as “comme,” to describe the way “spirits” (denetsak) appear to people. Sensations likely to be interpreted as manifestations of the invisible are described as absolutely singular perceptions, which can only be likened to something else, while remaining distinct from it. The comparisons drawn in ghost stories in Mongolia or elsewhere point to an open-ended sensory space, an object of perception that cannot be fully apprehended, a breach in the perceived world that witnesses can grasp only partially yet cannot circumscribe.

Of course, comparative devices, in the various forms presented above, are not the only ways to describe apparitions of the invisible, not even in Mongolia. A third story resorts to an even more peculiar narrative technique used to render the way a ghost appeared. It was told to me by Bümbejav, who is Tselei’s sister-in-law’s husband (HZH). The scene recounted here dates back to a time when Bümbejav was a little boy traveling with his grandfather.

This happened at the entrance of Y ol valley. One of my grandparents had come to fetch me in the village. He was called Aragshaa, and he was a great lama. So we were following a narrow path through the entrance of the valley, when the night suddenly fell. Everything became very dark. And then, right at the moment when we were ascending toward the valley, a smell of fritters came to my nostrils. My grandfather told me, “You go first my boy,” so I went forward with my horse, my grandfather behind me. And while we were going I smelt an intense odor of fritter.

“Oh grandfather, are they making fritters up there?”

“Oh yes, I guess so my boy.”

And we kept going. Finally we arrived and I went to sleep. At that moment, I had forgotten this odor of fritters. So I was going to sleep and then my grand-
father started to talk. He said that I had seen nothing but that there was a smell. He said I had heard the smell, and that just behind the rock of Yerööl, he had seen an old lady. She was taking out large square fritters to drain them. Himself, he was someone who could see things with his eyes. Then he read a prayer and blew on me, in case something had taken refuge in me.

This narrative is built according to the same model as the second one by Tselei. Both narrators are young at the time of the story; they are accompanied by someone who is much older and who seems to see plainly what the witnesses can only feel dimly—I shall come back to this point. In both stories, also, this elder figure lies to the young witness so as to not frighten him or her and to avoid the ghost safely. Then both stories end with the truth being revealed and the true origin of the strange perception being uncovered. Like in the first excerpt, in both these stories the perception of the ghost and its identification are absolutely separate.

Considering now the way Bümbeejav describes his perception, we clearly observe that no comparative device is used. The narrator simply relates that a smell of fritters came to his nostrils. However, toward the end of his story he uses the strangest expression: he says that he “heard the smell.” It is not very likely that it could be a mere slip of the tongue, as Bümbeejav repeats again afterward, “I didn't see her but I heard her smell.” This figure of speech is called in poetry “synesthesia,” and it is defined as “the poetic description of a sense impression in terms of another sense” (New Oxford American Dictionary). This expression might not be a conscious rhetorical technique used by the narrator to convey the specific quality of what he smelt. Rather, this astonishing synesthesia might be the spontaneous, and perhaps unconscious, rendering of the perfectly singular character of Bümbeejav’s experience. The smell was so singular that it almost did not qualify as a smell. The smell was so singular, and uncanny, that it felt almost like a sound. This synesthesia would then constitute a radical version of Tselei’s comparative expressions, the evocation of an absolutely unique, nonreproducible, sensory feeling—for what could be more uncannily singular than a smell you hear?

What the Invisible Looks Like

On the basis of the material presented so far it seems possible to characterize the particular kind of experience that might be recognized as a ghost in Mongolia. A few comparative examples taken from other parts of the
world show that, to a certain extent, this might also apply to other cases. One can stress at least three features to people's encounters with invisible things in Mongolia. First, I already pointed out that there is something to do with the *singularity* of the sensation interpreted as a ghost. Ghosts appear through perceptions that are at the same time similar to past experiences yet absolutely distinct and unique: they look familiar and are yet definitely strange to the witnesses' experience. The eerie feeling produced by the encounter of something familiar yet radically foreign—which has been famously exposed by Freud, although with a very different analytical agenda—seems to be at the center of all the ghost stories considered so far; it is really the crux of all the comparative devices found not only in Mongolia but also in Nepal and Europe.

There is a second feature in these stories that makes the encounters they depict uncanny, and it has to do with *agency*. It is quite notable that ghosts, in these stories, almost never appear as such to witnesses: rather, they occur to them through the actions they perform. You could argue that in Bümbeejav's story, the ghost appears fully to his grandfather, in the form of an old lady, but this is precisely because he is *not* an ordinary witness; he is “someone who sees with his eyes” (*nüdeer yum üzdeg hün*), as Bümbeejav himself specifies. To all others, to ordinary people, ghosts become manifest through the sensations produced by an action they are performing, and witnesses feel compelled to impute a necessary cause to an observed effect. Thus, in the first story, Tselei experiences the feeling of being touched and pulled, which supposes *someone* to perform this action. In the second, she hears a ringing sound, which implies the presence of *someone* activating a bell—or in this case something: the possibility that cattle might also produce a ringing sound being cunningly exploited by the doctor and her patient's husband. In the third account, Bümbeejav smells an odor of fritters, which supposes *someone* in the process of cooking them. In other words, these sensations are strongly indexical of an agency, yet *in the absence of any perceivable agent*—something narrators sometimes insist on (“there was no one in sight”).

In some instances, the necessary presence of agency behind the phenomenon perceived by narrators emerges logically from its repetition. The sensations experienced by Tselei, for example, are distinctly persistent, in a way that definitely rules out the possibility of a random and spontaneous phenomenon. A single sensation of pulling on her leg could have been the effect of her own unconscious movement during the night, whereas repeated brushing and pulling could only be caused by someone. The same with the staccato *jinger jinger* following her: a single metallic sound could
be mistaken for something else—for example, a stone she unwittingly kicked and which hit on a metallic bit sticking out from the snow. As for the fritters smell, it is obviously linked with a human presence, as they do not grow naturally. The plot of Dörvöd ghost stories is built around the contradicted expectations of witnesses who encounter phenomena that suppose agency while there is no agent possibly present.²

Western folklore, on the other hand, is full of ghosts that witnesses actually see, and that they mistake for people; even in Mongolia, as mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, “ghosts” might take a more solid corporeal form than they do in the stories presented. These situations, however, seem to correspond to a parallel and symmetrical situation in which the agents who appear do not act in any expectable, or even understandable, manner. In a way, they are agents with a dysfunctional agency, with whom it is impossible to communicate. This is a recurrent trait in encounters with the invisible across societies: one could evoke, for example, the returning souls among Siberian Nganassan, who appear to people under the guise of persons repeating systematically the words of greetings said to them by unfortunate passersby, who will eventually get upset and enter in deadly fights with the apparitions (Lambert 2002–2003, 313). Open any good collection of literary ghost stories (e.g., Dalby 1988): the plot is often built around the description of the ghost’s uncanny mode of action. Conversely, this is what is so funny in Oscar Wilde’s short story The Canterville Ghost (1887): not only are the witnesses not at all impressed by the ghost but they can talk to him, scold him, comfort him, or convince him to use oil for his old, squeaky armor. What is unusual with the Canterville ghost is precisely that he is an agent with a transparent agency, with whom communication is not a problem.

Finally, a third feature of the sensations described in the stories presented above is that they are somehow lacking in their nature. Not only are they often very fugitive, and disappear as soon as they have appeared, but these sensations are also typically fragmentary. Indeed, contrary to ordinary perceptions which stimulate simultaneously several senses, the perceptions described in these narratives only occur to witnesses through one of their senses. Whereas in an ordinary situation I would see and hear someone talking to me, and I would see, hear, and smell someone frying fritters, ghosts in these accounts are heard, or smelt, or touched, but not seen. Alternatively, when they are seen, they cannot be heard, or they cannot be touched. In other words, the sensations described in these narratives are characteristically incomplete.² This certainly adds to the uncanny character of the encounter, inasmuch as it shakes what Merleau-Ponty...
(1968, 3) has called the “perceptual faith”—the certainty that “the world is what we see.”

**Haunting as Disrupted Dwelling: Shaking the Perceptual Faith**

In the *Phenomenology of Perception*, published in 1945, Merleau-Ponty convincingly challenges the view of humans as subjects contained within the limits of their bodies. According to his view, we do not find our way into the world by deciphering the information brought by our senses from the outside into the prison of our body. Perception, moreover, does not consist in the intellectual combination of information provided by all the senses: on the contrary, as we move into the world, our senses merge into a single perception. Thus, in his last and posthumously published work, *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty stresses that “in perception we witness the miracle of a totality that surpasses what one thinks to be its conditions or its parts, that from afar holds them under its power, as if they existed only on its threshold and were destined to lose themselves in it” (1968, 8).

Merleau-Ponty takes the example of binocular vision to illustrate this “miracle” of perception: binocular vision is not obtained by combining two monocular views, it is a continuous synthesis in which monocular views disappear as such. In the same way, vision, smell, and touch are brought together by the whole body in movement, in a continuous perception of the world. Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty argues that our involvement in the world is prior to our objectification of the world, or that existence in the world is a necessary precondition to perceiving it—we are always in the world while we conceive of it. Perception is not the world coming into us; it is “being out there” in the world. We experience perception in action, and we engage in the world by perceiving it with our whole body.

Now, looking back at the witnesses’ accounts of their encounters with “ghosts,” one could argue that it is precisely this perceptual engagement in the world through the whole body that is challenged by the sensations described—indeed by *one single sensation* (one sound, one smell) that stands out from the others and disrupts the “miracle” of continuous perception. Ghosts seem to be experienced as parts of the world that fail to be grasped in a single perception by all the senses, as ordinary experience does. It could almost be suggested that Merleau-Ponty himself makes this point, when he drops this fantastic comment as a side remark in the *Phenomenology of Perception*: “If a phenomenon—for example, a reflection or a light gust of wind—strikes only one of my senses, it is a phantom, and
it will come near to real existence only if, by some chance, it becomes capable of speaking to my other senses, as does the wind when, for example, it blows strongly and can be seen in the tumult it causes in the surrounding countryside” ([1945] 2002, 368). Here of course, Merleau-Ponty uses the term *phantom* ("fantôme" in French) as a metaphor, but his word choice is quite telling, as perceptions that are felt as the presence of ghosts, in Mongolia and elsewhere, are precisely characterized by their *incomplete* character. Any incomplete perception is not felt as a ghost of course (the one described by Merleau-Ponty is not), but it might become so, and shake the witness’s “perceptual faith,” if the other conditions mentioned above happen to be combined in his experience. In the same way as an incomplete perception “will come near to real existence only if . . . it becomes capable of speaking to my other senses,” it “will come near to” a ghost experience if, “by any chance,” it appears as familiar and singular at the same time and conveys a counterintuitive configuration of agency.

The term *perceptual faith* is introduced by Merleau-Ponty right at the beginning of *The Visible and the Invisible*. It is defined as the implicit assumption, “shared by the natural man and the philosopher—the moment he opens his eyes,” that “the world is what we see” (1968, 3). Nevertheless, perception is like time for Augustine: it is familiar to anybody, yet as soon as we try to explain what it is, many problems arise. It is thus the task of the philosopher, and therefore of Merleau-Ponty’s book, to rethink perception in depth by challenging this intuitive “faith.”

Compared to this philosophical, reasoned questioning of perception, ghosts appear as an immediate, sudden, and irreflexive shaking of perceptual faith. Ghosts, as sensations that challenge abruptly the implicit certainty that “the world is what we see,” give us in a flash the uncanny suspicion that what we perceive might actually not be the entire world. Ghosts give us an uncertain glimpse of a dimension that usually remains invisible to us but that might nevertheless be part of the world. These sensations thus challenge our very dwelling in the world by hinting at things which might well be out there all the time, although they usually escape our senses. Ghosts, in other words, hint at the uncanny feeling that the world is not graspable through a single regime of perception.

**Invisible Things and Regimes of Communication**

Indeed, there is more to Dörvöd ghost stories than the characterization of people’s exceptional and transient glimpses at an unseen aspect of their
environment. The stories reproduced above also feature exceptional individuals who appear to be endowed with special abilities to “see” or to act on the invisible. The narratives crucially point out that ghosts, spirits, and all these things that are called “invisible” in Mongolian are not perceivable by everybody in the same way. Indeed, whereas most people can only have fragmentary glimpses of them, some others seem to be able to see them fully and continually. These persons are said to be able to “see things” (yum üze-) or even to “see things with their eyes” (nüdeer yum üze-). No reason is really given to account for this special ability: it is simply known that “they have seen things since they were young.”

Of course, it is quite frequent across human societies for specific people to be recognized as having special knowledge of, or privileged access to, the invisible world. In many regions of Mongolia, in the North, in the East, and in the capital city, Ulaanbaatar, there are shamans (böö) who are credited with the ability to see and act on invisible things. Yet “people who see with their eyes” in the stories presented above are not shamans (as mentioned earlier in this chapter, there are no shamans left in the region where the narratives were collected). Crucially, and contrary to shamans, “those who see with their eyes” cannot act on what they see: they are powerless to exorcise or satisfy ghosts. All they can do is avoid cautiously the encountered apparition, so as to prevent the dangers of a direct interaction with it. They protect the witnesses by lying to them, so as to spare them a potentially harmful fright. Interestingly, these seers who see but cannot act on invisible things are in symmetrical opposition to ritual specialists who can act on ghosts, by feeding them or expelling them, but are unable to see them. In other words, these narratives describe a distribution of communicative abilities between different kinds of people, a regime of communication featuring three possible relationships with invisible things.

Firstly, there is the relationship that ordinary people have with them: as they can perceive ghosts only occasionally, and in a fragmentary way, ordinary people can suffer their manifestation only passively. Ghosts’ manifestations shake their “perceptual faith” by prompting the uncanny feeling that the world is not, or not only, what they see. This fear is unsettling, and indeed is said to be harmful, for it may cause the soul to escape, which will lead to certain death unless a specialist is able to call it back. Secondly, there is the relationship that “those who see with their eyes” are thought to have. For them, arguably, encountering a ghost is not really an uncanny experience, because they can perceive it fully: “invisible things” are not invisible to seers; they are part of the perceived world, so there is nothing
disruptive about haunting phenomena for seers. One could almost won-
der how they know which are ghosts and which are living people if seers
do not differentiate them through their mode of manifestation. However,
these seers are powerless; they can neither take actions toward ghosts nor
interact with them. Finally, there is the relationship that ritual specialists
are credited to have with the invisible: although they cannot see ghosts,
they can perform rituals to relieve other people from ghosts’ disruptive
presence.

This distribution would be completely different if there were still sha-
mans among the Dörvöd, as can be seen from the example of their Tu-
van neighbors (Stépanoff 2007). Besides “simple people,” who are just
blind and passive, Tuvans operate the same opposition between helpless
seers and visionless ritual specialists; they however recognize shamans’
ability to both “perceive and interact” (ibid., 486) with the invisible. An
even broader comparative perspective would show that different societies
suppose very different patterns of communicational possibility between
living people and the spirit world. Among many other examples, one
could evoke here the Achuar, who not only distinguish between different
kinds of people but also—as is so frequent throughout the Amazon and
elsewhere—between different states (dreaming or wakefulness, among
others), in which possibilities of communication follow another pattern
(Taylor 1993). Whatever the variables in each case, the possibility that the
world might not be perceived by everybody in the same way—and no hu-
man society seems to ignore such a possibility—prompts the charting of
a specific regime of communication, a distribution of possible and impos-
sible sensations and actions.

Conclusion

Ghosts might be highly suspicious in their manifestation, and first of all to
witnesses themselves, they might even be “lies” most of the time, yet they
are impossible to rule out completely as pure products of human imagi-
nation, as objects of either belief or disbelief. Indeed, the most skeptical
among Dörvöd herders might agree with the most passionate nineteenth-
century spiritualist, in that some specific sensations effectively shake our
intuitive faith that the world is always “what we see” and disrupt our
dwelling in it, whatever our cosmological conceptions might be. The no-
tion of a regime of communication has been proposed in this chapter as a
methodological framework for the comparison of patterns of experienced relationships with the invisible across different societies. Running counter to a recent trend in social anthropology, this concept argues for the “primacy of perception” (Merleau-Ponty 1974) over “cosmologies” in the analysis of people’s relationship with the invisible. This chapter, in other words, advocates for the study of how invisible things are perceived, rather than conceived of, and for the comparative analysis of specific regimes of communication across human societies.