

Poetry by Prof. Gabeba Baderoon

Ghost Technologies

On button. Red light we learn the meaning of.

In 1976, the Soweto student protests are erased from the black and white television that arrives that year in the front room and from then a line is drawn between what happened and did not, what is real and is not.

Each night, the children eat hurriedly in the next room, our eyes already sidling through the door to the blank screen. Just before six, waiting on chairs facing the new centre, we watch an intuition pulse through black and white snow. It flickers then hisses and turns into the high whine of the test pattern that on the dot of six becomes a face.

Prayer starts the evening as prayer will end it at midnight with the Epilogue.

The continuity announcer's lips slide suddenly into sidelong fractions till we jiggle the bunny aerial and prop it upside down against the wall behind the screen.

My parents make a timetable. No watching after the 8 o'clock news, so *after the news* becomes a genre for grownups. No TV on Sundays when the state teaches you to become Christian.

Telefunken, Fuchsware, Tedex – the names next to the On button change as our TVs break over the years. The single channel alternates between English and Afrikaans, then the government creates new stations in Zulu and Xhosa. We are trained into separate realities.

The first time I see a black woman on TV is in an advert for dishwashing liquid in which a white woman praises her domestic servant for choosing a new detergent. “Betsy, you’re so clever,” to which the black woman responds shyly, “Oh, madam.” Even as a child, I can see this is not about cleaning dishes, but some other kind of labour.

We watch to become ourselves.

TV teaches us good black voices. The black people reading the news sound as though they are sitting inside glass, and come from nowhere we know.

In 1982, my mother buys a Phillips video cassette recorder with semi-remote control at the Rand Easter Show and one day someone trips over the 12-foot cord and after that the VCR only works with the cord plugged in.

In *Live and Let Die*, my eyes widen when James Bond has sex with Rosie Carver, a desire apartheid seemed to make almost biologically impossible. I press rewind on the semi-remote and watch again.

My brother buys an Apple computer with a green screen and orange cursor he hooks up to the TV. We play tennis and the ball sounds hollow but urgent, our fingers sore from slamming the arrow keys, the beginning of games that hurt and where only the screen makes a sound.

In the early days of the internet I navigate with arrow keys and DOS and in 1994 choose my first email name, gab. Messages sent to it still reach me today. In 2002 I move for a year to England, the centre of the real, and have to queue in person at the bank because their online world seems not to exist. Down here, we rejig every technology and accelerate the virtual in the absence of the physical.

But capital is watching and tells us *airtime* is as necessary as oxygen, a perfect philosophy of the real. In our houses ghost technologies run down the prepaid electric meters.

Precise injuries of the neck, thumb and eye create a new kind of body. The machines we hold close prompt infinite new desires and an infinite hunger for newness.

We don't notice when the category of the evening disappears – the word for *after 5*, an Off button that once brought the day's work to a close.