

A Report on “Ghost Criminology: A  
Framework for the Discipline’s Spectral  
Turn” by Fiddler et al. (2024)

Reviewer 2

February 06, 2026

v1



**isit**credible.com

## Disclaimer

This report was generated by large language models, overseen by a human editor. It represents the honest opinion of The Catalogue of Errors Ltd, but its accuracy should be verified by a qualified expert. Comments can be made [here](#). Any errors in the report will be corrected in future revisions.

I am wiser than this person; for it is likely that neither of us knows anything fine and good, but he thinks he knows something when he does not know it, whereas I, just as I do not know, do not think I know, either. I seem, then, to be wiser than him in this small way, at least: that what I do not know, I do not think I know, either.

Plato, *The Apology of Socrates*, 21d

To err is human. All human knowledge is fallible and therefore uncertain. It follows that we must distinguish sharply between truth and certainty. That to err is human means not only that we must constantly struggle against error, but also that, even when we have taken the greatest care, we cannot be completely certain that we have not made a mistake.

Karl Popper, 'Knowledge and the Shaping of Reality'

## Overview

**Citation:** Fiddler, M., Linnemann, T., and Kindynis, T. (2024). Ghost Criminology: A Framework for the Discipline's Spectral Turn. *British Journal of Criminology*, Vol. 64, No. 1, pp. 1–16.

**URL:** <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azad022>

**Abstract Summary:** This article proposes “ghost criminology” as a new sub-discipline, drawing on spectrality and Derrida’s hauntology, to explore harms experienced as ‘out of joint’ in time. It sets out a framework using three strands—the (in)visible, the (in)corporeal, and dead space—to reckon with the afterlives of past harms and the ghosts of the future.

**Key Methodology:** Theoretical framework development, conceptual metaphor analysis, literature review (social theory, psychoanalysis, philosophy), and proposal of innovative methodological approaches (spectral ethnography, ghost-watching, counter-visual ethnography).

**Research Question:** How can criminology explore and reckon with harms experienced as ‘out of joint’ in time, and how can justice be achieved within this sense of disrupted temporality?

## Summary

### Is It Credible?

Fiddler et al. propose “Ghost Criminology” as a distinct sub-discipline designed to grapple with the “spectral turn” in the social sciences. Their central premise is that traditional criminology, bound by linear time and positivist rationality, fails to capture harms that are “out of joint”—traumas that linger from the past or anticipated injuries from the future. They offer a framework built on three strands—the (in)visible, the (in)corporeal, and dead or haunted spaces—and argue that by “conjuring, exorcising and giving proper burial” to these forces, the discipline can achieve a Derridean sense of justice (p. 2). While the article succeeds as a provocative metaphorical intervention, its credibility as a rigorous methodological framework is strained by internal theoretical contradictions and operational vagueness.

The primary tension lies in the ontological status of the “ghost” itself. The authors initially frame spectrality as a “conceptual metaphor” distinct from the spirits of “supernatural fiction,” intended to reveal how the past and future disrupt the present (p. 1). However, they later pivot to critique approaches that treat ghosts merely as metaphors, arguing that researchers must recognize the “ontological status” of the ghost to respect the “lived experiences” of those who encounter them (pp. 12–13). This creates an epistemological dilemma: the framework attempts to operate simultaneously as a secular, analytical tool for Western academics and as a validation of non-secular realities. Without resolving whether the ghost is a literary device for the researcher or a reality for the subject, the sub-discipline risks becoming a form of performative re-description rather than a coherent method of inquiry.

Furthermore, the article’s stated goal of “resolution” appears fundamentally at odds with its theoretical bedrock. Drawing heavily on Jacques Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*, the authors argue that the purpose of ghost criminology is to “exorcise” and give

“proper burial” to achieve justice (p. 2). Yet, in the Derridean tradition they cite, the spectre represents an infinite ethical demand that *cannot* be ontologically resolved or buried; to exorcise the ghost is often framed as an act of forgetting or injustice. The authors seemingly acknowledge this when criticizing the US government’s “exorcism” of Osama bin Laden as an attempt to erase history (p. 10), yet they simultaneously champion exorcism as a positive goal for their own discipline. This theoretical incoherence leaves the reader unsure whether “justice” means remembering the ghost (hauntology) or removing it (exorcism).

Despite these frictions, the article makes a compelling contribution by emphasizing the “ghosts of the future” (p. 6). By extending the concept of haunting to include “debts” owed to future generations—such as the anticipated harms of climate change or carceral expansion—the authors offer a novel temporal lens that transcends the usual backward-looking focus of trauma studies. However, the methodological toolkit proposed to access these insights remains impressionistic. Techniques like “ghost-watching” and “street-side séances” are described as relying on “imaginative engagement” and “serendipitous” discovery (pp. 6, 11–12). While evocative, these methods lack clear operational criteria, raising the risk of circularity where researchers simply project “haunting” onto any phenomenon they analyze, confirming their premises rather than generating falsifiable or empirical findings.

## **The Bottom Line**

The proposal for a “Ghost Criminology” is a creative and theoretically ambitious attempt to integrate non-linear time into the study of harm. It successfully highlights the importance of “future ghosts” and the limitations of positivist timelines. However, the framework is weakened by unresolved contradictions regarding the nature of the ghost (metaphor vs. reality) and the goals of analysis (resolution vs. remembrance), and its methodologies remain too vague to serve as a reliable roadmap for

empirical research.

## Potential Issues

**Contradictory definition of the central concept:** The article's theoretical foundation appears to rest on a contradiction regarding the ontological status of its central subject, the "ghost." The authors initially define the ghost as a non-literal "conceptual metaphor" for social forces, stating, "these are not the spirits familiar to us from supernatural fiction" but rather "forces that push both our experience and understanding of time 'out of joint'" (p. 1). Later in the article, however, this position is complicated by a critique of approaches that reduce the ghost to mere metaphor. Citing Lincoln and Lincoln, the authors note that focusing only on "'ghostly' signals, matters, and traces" is "to ignore '[g]hosts qua ghosts'" (p. 12). They then advocate for recognizing the "'ontological status' of the ghost" to properly respond to the lived experiences of those who encounter them (pp. 12–13). This creates a significant theoretical tension: it is unclear whether "ghost criminology" treats ghosts as an analytical tool for the academic or as an ontological reality for the subject. While the authors may intend this as a nuanced expansion of their framework, the article does not fully resolve the methodological and epistemological challenges of holding both positions simultaneously.

**Incompatibility between the goal of resolution and the Derridean framework:** The article's stated aim of achieving "resolution" appears to be in tension with its core theoretical source, Jacques Derrida's concept of hauntology. The authors repeatedly frame their project as a form of "praxis: conjuring, exorcising and giving proper burial" (p. 2) in order to achieve justice. This goal seems at odds with a Derridean understanding, where the spectre represents an unresolvable and infinite ethical demand that must not be silenced or laid to rest. In this tradition, to "exorcise" the ghost is often seen as an act of ethical failure or forgetting. The article highlights this tension itself when it critiques the US government's disposal of Osama bin Laden's body as a negative "exorcism of sorts" (p. 10), yet elsewhere advocates for "exorcis-

ing” as a positive goal for ghost criminology (pp. 2, 6). While the authors may be deliberately adapting Derrida for the practical concerns of criminology, the article does not fully articulate the criteria that distinguish a “good” exorcism (achieving justice) from a “bad” one (erasure), leaving a potential incoherence at the heart of the project’s purpose.

**Belated and potentially performative engagement with decolonial thought:** The article’s engagement with decolonial theory may be structurally flawed. The authors build their entire framework for a “new sub-discipline” almost exclusively from a Eurocentric intellectual tradition, drawing heavily on Derrida, Marx, and Freud. They explicitly acknowledge this limitation late in the article, stating, “we should note that our focus here has largely been of knowledges produced in the global North” (p. 12). The proposed solution is framed as a future project: “Our next task must be to reach out to authors of the global South” (p. 12). This approach positions decolonization not as a foundational element of the theory but as a subsequent addition to a framework already built on a Western base. This risks replicating a colonial intellectual practice where Western thought is centered and non-Western traditions are marginalized as a secondary consideration. Furthermore, this creates a potential epistemological hierarchy where the ghost is treated as a “conceptual metaphor” for a Western academic audience but as an ontological reality for non-Western subjects, a division the article does not fully resolve (pp. 1, 12).

**The framework may function as a self-fulfilling prophecy:** The methodology of ghost criminology, as presented, risks being circular. The framework is offered as a tool for analysis, but it may function primarily as a hermeneutic for re-description. The method involves adopting the vocabulary of “spectre,” “haunting,” and time being “out of joint” and applying it to criminological phenomena. The analysis does not appear to discover haunting so much as it re-interprets events *as* haunting. The authors seem to acknowledge this interpretive stance when they state, “In doing so we conjure ghosts as conceptual metaphors allowing us to see what we feel haunting

us” (p. 2). Because the conclusion—that a phenomenon is “haunted”—is embedded in the premise of applying the framework, it is debatable whether this approach can generate new empirical knowledge or primarily serves to re-describe existing problems in a new language. This is a common feature of interpretive paradigms, but it raises questions about the framework’s capacity for falsifiability or its ability to do more than confirm its own premises.

**The framework’s three strands may lack analytical distinction:** The article’s proposed three-strand framework—“the (in)visible,” “the (in)corporeal,” and “dead and haunted spaces” (p. 7)—may lack analytical rigor due to significant overlap between its categories. It is difficult to conceive of one strand without invoking the others; for instance, a “dead and haunted space” (Strand 3) is defined by the presence of the “(in)corporeal” (Strand 2), which is often “(in)visible” (Strand 1). The authors acknowledge that there are “evident overlaps” and suggest the framework should be viewed through a “kaleidoscope,” where different elements come into focus at different times (p. 7). While this metaphor provides a rationale for the fluid boundaries, it is debatable whether this approach offers sufficient analytical precision for a robust framework or if it excuses a lack of stable definitions that could hinder consistent application by other researchers.

**The proposed methodological toolkit may be epistemologically incoherent:** The article proposes a methodological toolkit for ghost criminology that combines approaches with seemingly incompatible epistemological foundations. For example, it includes psychoanalytic techniques derived from interpretive theories of the psyche (p. 3) alongside the methods of Forensic Architecture, which are grounded in the reconstruction of material evidence, spatial analysis, and verifiable timelines (p. 9). The article does not provide a meta-theoretical bridge to reconcile these different ways of knowing—one based on the unseeable dynamics of the psyche and the other on the material world. Without this, “ghost criminology” may appear less like a coherent research paradigm and more like a thematic collection of unconventional

methods whose underlying assumptions about truth and evidence may conflict.

**The central goal of “justice” remains abstract and operationally vague:** The article repeatedly posits that the ultimate aim of ghost criminology is to “achieve justice” (pp. 2, 6, 14), but this claim is not substantiated with a concrete, operational definition. The framework relies on the philosophically complex “Derridean sense of ‘justice’” (p. 7), which is often understood as an unconditional and ultimately unachievable demand. The proposed methods for achieving this justice—“conjuring, exorcising and giving proper burial” (p. 2)—are primarily metaphorical and are not translated into tangible interventions such as policy recommendations, legal reforms, or specific restorative practices. The article’s conclusion that justice can “begin” simply by “recognizing that time is out of joint” (p. 14) risks reducing its call for justice to an academic exercise of re-description with no clear pathway to material change for those affected by harm.

**Methodological guidance is impressionistic and lacks clear operationalization:** The article advocates for several innovative methodologies but describes them in vague and evocative terms rather than with clear procedural guidance. For example, “ghost-watching” is defined as “‘a vigilant perception’” (p. 6), while “ghost ethnography” is described as a “‘sensibility over and above [...] any prescribed set of methodological practices’” (p. 11), which explicitly resists codification. Similarly, the framework lacks a discussion of what constitutes valid evidence for elusive phenomena like “spectres” or “atmospheres,” instead championing “imaginative engagement” (p. 11). While this aligns with the interpretive and post-positivist traditions of cultural criminology, the lack of clear operationalization or evidentiary standards may make it difficult for other researchers to adopt, critique, or build upon the framework, potentially limiting its utility as a shared research program.

**The framework validates methodologies with problematic histories:** The article proposes adapting methodologies with ethically and epistemologically troubling origins without fully resolving their problematic legacies. It suggests using tech-

niques that “echo the techniques of spirit photography” (p. 6), a practice historically based on fraud, and notes that Sir Francis Galton’s eugenicist composite portraiture “mimicked” these same techniques (p. 8). While the authors intend to subvert these tools for progressive ends—for example, by contrasting Galton’s “repressive logic” with an artist’s use of similar techniques for self-reflection (p. 8)—it is debatable whether the article adequately addresses the ethical baggage of rehabilitating methods rooted in deception and racial profiling as tools for achieving justice.

**The concept of “haunting” may be diluted by its conflation with “atmosphere”:**

The article risks weakening the analytical specificity of its core concept, “haunting,” by linking it closely with the broader concept of “affective atmospheres” from affect theory (p. 11). In spectral theory, “haunting” typically refers to a specific temporal disruption caused by the return of a repressed past or a particular trauma. “Atmosphere,” in contrast, often refers to a more general, pre-cognitive spatial mood. By suggesting that atmospheres can “remind us of... haunting” and that a focus on them can capture a “phenomenology of haunted space” (p. 11), the article may blur the distinction between a focused analysis of temporal disjuncture and a more generic study of spatial affect, potentially diminishing the unique analytical contribution of a hauntological approach.

**The use of economic language risks simplifying ethical obligations:** The article frequently employs economic language to describe ethical responsibilities, which may risk reducing a complex philosophical concept to a transactional one. By framing obligations in terms of “A debt is owed” (p. 1) and “weighing the debts to the future” (p. 6), the authors may inadvertently commodify trauma and justice. In the Derridean tradition they cite, the debt to the past is often considered infinite and unpayable. Framing it as something that can be “weighed” implies a calculable and potentially finite justice, which could be seen as contradicting the hauntological premise that time is “out of joint” and that such neat resolutions are impossible. While likely intended as a metaphor for responsibility, this language carries a risk of

misinterpretation.

## Future Research

**Clarifying the ontological stance:** Future work should rigorously define the epistemological status of the “ghost” within criminological research. Rather than oscillating between metaphor and ontology, researchers could develop distinct protocols for “metaphorical haunting” (structural/institutional legacies) versus “experiential haunting” (phenomenological accounts of subjects), ensuring that the analytical lens matches the specific type of social reality being investigated.

**Operationalizing spectral methodologies:** To move beyond impressionistic analysis, future scholarship could establish concrete, reproducible protocols for “spectral ethnography” and “ghost-watching.” This might involve adapting specific techniques from sensory ethnography or forensic architecture to create a standardized coding system for identifying “temporal anomalies” or “traces” in physical spaces, allowing for comparative analysis across different sites of trauma.

**Decentering the theoretical canon:** Future research should reconstruct the framework of ghost criminology by centering non-Western and Indigenous epistemologies of time and ancestry from the outset, rather than appending them to a Deridean/Freudian base. This would address the current framework’s Eurocentrism and potentially resolve the tension between “exorcism” and “justice” by drawing on restorative justice traditions that have distinct, established rituals for reckoning with the presence of ancestors and the weight of the past.

© 2026 The Catalogue of Errors Ltd

This work is licensed under a

**Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License**

(CC BY 4.0)

You are free to share and adapt this material for any purpose,  
provided you give appropriate attribution.

**isitcredible.com**