
Screening the Supernatural: Introduction

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The supernatural, the fantastic, and mysterious are often regarded as representative of traditional beliefs that are opposed to, and have been overcome, by a modern world of rationality and technology. However, given that as the uncanny (*das Unheimliche*, in Freud's terms) merges with the homely and familiar (*das Heimliche*), the supernatural and the spectres of an outer world are far from being suppressed in contemporary culture.¹ References to the Gothic are at the heart of the work of 20th Century as different as Virginia Woolf, Samuel Beckett and Bret Easton Ellis.² These references might be imitative or parodic, but they still respond to technological threats or achievements as well as to individual or collective fears and to a society, and sometimes a masculinity, in crisis. As Fred Botting puts it: "*The uncanny, an effect of the emergence of modernity, participates as much in its constitution and its decomposition.*"³

Where cinema is concerned, film is both haunted and haunting, a medium dealing with many ghosts, not only in the genres of the supernatural. *The Haunted Screen* was the title chosen by both Lotte Eisner, for her famous reading of German Expressionism in film, and Lee

¹ Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny' in: *The Uncanny*, London, Penguin, 2003, 134. Freud's essay was first published in 1919.

² John Paul Riquelme, ed., *Gothic and Modernity: Essaying Dark Literary Modernity*, Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2008.

³ Fred Botting, *Limits of Horror: Technologies, Bodies, Gothic*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008, p. 8.

Kovacs, for her investigation of ghost figures in films from the 1930s to the 1990s.⁴ In the early 19th Century, poetry's explorations of inner life prefigured what science expressed in its own terms at the end of the century; Byron's dark Romanticism and Poe's Gothic tales were preoccupied with phenomena which existed beyond nature before Freud found labels for them. Séances, most fashionable in the late 19th Century, mingled spiritualism and spectacle, anticipating new entertainment media such as the cinema. At the intersection of reality and fiction, belief and spectacle, film appeared as a form of modern magic and has still not completely lost its magical aura, possessing the power to enliven and to enchant.

As a projection of the imagination, film makes the unknown visible and explores the unconscious. It represents everyday reality and recreates the world of dreams, a space in which religious belief and superstition co-exist. Cinematic narratives of the fantastic cross spatio-temporal and generic boundaries, creating a feeling of instability through the blending of generic elements. By exploring the abyss between rationality and fantasy, films dealing with supernatural phenomena and devices recall the complexity of a cinematic viewing experience which is made up of feelings, body reactions and thoughts. As Octave Mannoni puts it, the modern viewer does not fully believe in illusion anymore, yet part of him/her is still captured by the suggestive power of the image and the spectacular.⁵

The current inflation of mystery thrillers and fantasy films produced for cinema and television underlines the extent to which the fascination with the supernatural is still very much alive. The supernatural invades all genres. The mixture of spiritualism and entertainment to be found in the very origins of cinema continues to find expression in contemporary films and their updating of ghost tales under the auspices of psychological knowledge and understanding. Christopher Nolan's *The Prestige* (USA/UK, 2006) deals with both the 'uncanny' (events which can be explained by using logic) and the 'marvellous' (events which are unexplainable), concepts described by literary theorist Tzvetan Todorov.⁶ Moreover, the mystifying elements borrowed from the Gothic tradition fulfil the viewer's wish to be entertained by unmasking the illusion at the very heart of film-making. Guy Ritchie's *Sherlock Holmes* (USA/Germany/UK, 2009), for instance, depicts the pre-cinematic world and its preoccupation with the magical as well as the taste for spectacular events far from everyday experience. Occult rituals integrated into the narrative hark back to the historical roots of film while also pointing to contemporary tendencies in film-making.

The photographic representation of ghosts often follows older forms of representation, those to do with fluid, transparent bodies as they appeared in 19th Century occultism. At the end of Allan Dwan's *The Iron Mask* (USA, 1929) D'Artagnan and his Musketeer friends are

⁴ Lotte Eisner, *The Haunted Screen: Expressionism in the German Cinema and the Influence of Max Reinhardt*, 2nd. ed., Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008, a book first published in an abridged edition in French in 1952; Lee Kovacs, *The Haunted Screen: Ghosts in Literature and Film*, Jefferson, NC: MacFarland, 2005.

⁵ Octave Mannoni, *Clefs pour l'imaginaire, ou l'Autre Scène*, Paris: Seuil, 1969.

⁶ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1973.

dead, but appear again as translucent, ghostly figures (an effect created by over-exposure) to greet the audience. Seen from our point of view, the sequence seems to comment on the history of film, anticipating the end of the silent era by showing Douglas Fairbanks, Sr., one of its main stars, in one of his final roles. In today's cinema, elements of the fantastic increasingly inspire film, updating generic forms and devices, in examples as different as Clint Eastwood's *Pale Rider* (USA, 1985) or Bertrand Tavernier's *In the Electric Mist* (France/USA, 2009). Horror films and science fiction tales narrate the supernatural within their own frame of conventions. Vampires, werewolves and other creatures haunt the cinema from its beginnings and have been reborn in films addressing an adolescent audience. The success of the *Harry Potter* series and *Twilight Saga* (novels and films alike) confirms the ongoing fascination with the supernatural and the fantastic, which in the case of both series is imbued with nostalgia for a lost world in which imagination prevails over technology.

Other figures in the realm of the supernatural include angels and demons, zombies and aliens. However, the other, the unknown, is not only expressed by photographed (or computer- animated) characters, but may be an invisible threat, creating constant tension, as in *The Blair Witch Project* (Sánchez and Foxe, USA, 1999). Phantoms or zombies and other creatures challenging normalcy can be seen as a materialisation of fear, as figures of individual and social crisis. The supernatural expressed through horror film devices and the recurrence of spirits may be linked to loss, grief and death, as in Keating's *Wake Wood* (Ireland/UK, 2008) - the first theatrical release from Hammer Films in 30 years - Sheridan's *Dream House* (USA/Canada, 2011), and McPherson's *The Eclipse* (Ireland, 2008). The mourner, unable to overcome the death of a loved one, is haunted by visions which the cinema materialises. Trauma, inner images, and sensations are brought to the surface of the film; the fantastic appearance is experienced as a real presence by the characters facing fear, guilt and grief. Once again, occultism and psychology are blended in a filmic discourse that relies on generic devices and aesthetics (such as *film noir* in the case of *The Eclipse*). In Hitchcock's *Spellbound* (USA, 1945), psychiatric experience and surrealism are brought together to depict mental states, whereas one of the recent Hammer-productions, Watkins' *The Woman in Black* (UK, 2012), the film version of a successful British play written in the eighties but now set in the Edwardian era, constantly reveals the threat to masculinity often hidden within the conventions of the horror genre.

The Eclipse and *The Woman in Black* are only two recent examples of films which explore encounters between everyday life and the supernatural. In so doing, they try to deal with the complexities of past, present and future, and reveal the extent to which film is able to overcome the boundaries of time and the constraints of realism. Just as the voice of Joe Gillis – that of a dead man – in Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (USA, 1950) may echo the magical power of film (or its power to allow the viewer to suspend disbelief), so the ghost of the protagonist's dead wife in *The Eclipse* is a signifier of the abolition of boundaries. At a time of interest in the occult and realms beyond rationality, 'magical' thinking is integrated into film, not only in recent Native American, Aboriginal or Maori films (Caro's *Whale Rider*,

NZ/Germany, 2002) but also a film like Sheridan's *In America* (Ireland/UK/USA, 2002), which blends Irish folklore with voodoo in the context of contemporary New York.

The articles in this issue of *Film Journal* investigate issues of the supernatural and the fantastic mainly in American cinema, as well as in some British and Irish films, from a broad range of perspectives. The main focus is on modernity and on questions concerning the notion of illusion and cinematic self-reference. Robbie McAllister explores the retro-futuristic movement and literary sub-genre known as steampunk in the frame of a critical examination of the 19th Century as "a widespread nostalgia for the technological materials of a previous age". Films such as Coraci's *Around the World in 80 Days* (UK/USA, 2004), Nolan's *The Prestige* (USA/UK, 2006) and Ritchie's *Sherlock Holmes* (USA/UK, 2009) re-imagine historical figures and Victorian settings in postmodern action adventures in the course of which magic challenges rationality and the boundaries of rationalism are tested and redefined. By examining narratives in which gigantic but anachronistic mechanical machines appear alongside phantoms and spectres, McAllister reveals the nature of the conflict between these apparent anachronisms and modernity and underlines how much the defeat of magic can be used to better preserve it.

Justyna Budzik considers Sam Raimi's *Oz the Great and Powerful* (USA, 2013) in relation to pre-cinematic devices, setting the film within the history of phantasmagoric shows. She explores the dynamic of enlightened rationalism and romantic faith in the supernatural, confronting it with the opposition between the archetypal fairy-tale wizard and the figure of the illusionist, who takes advantage of technology and science in order to make his spectators believe in the powers of the supernatural. Her reflections lead into a broader discourse upon popular fairy-tale films as offering a self-referential image of cinema archaeology. Frances Kamm explores the use of motion-capture in *A Christmas Carol* (USA, 2009) as a device employed by director Robert Zemeckis, not unlike George Méliès in *The Haunted Castle* (France, 1896), to reveal the strangeness of the filmic body. Kamm's exploration of boundaries between technology and the supernatural takes into account a historical frame provided by early cinematic inventions revised in the era of digitisation. The motion-capture process, transforming the actor's body into an animated figure, still bearing a close resemblance to its real-world counterpart, draws attention to "the haunted nature of the filmic body", which is expressed on narrative, technological, and symbolic levels.

Danièle André presents Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (USA, 1992) within the Victorian time-frame of the original novel. Though inspired by 'art for art's sake', the director's critical approach to a contemporary world in which rationality is enforced to silence human imagination goes beyond the well-known slogan, revealing the use and meaning of light (of modernity) and shadow (of an occulted past) in cultural and psychological terms. Exploring socio-cultural and psychological devices, André reminds us that Coppola's film pays tribute to the filmic art by giving a brief history of the motion picture through the use of the different techniques the film industry has invented since its emergence in the late 19th Century. Linda Sheppard explores the film and literary versions of *Rosemary's Baby* (USA, 1968) in

the light of contemporary cultural debates regarding the role and efficacy of the old and the orthodox versus the new and the modern. If on a thematic and narrative level family and religion are in conflict with the requirements of the new consumer society, the concern with the conventions of the Gothic reflects the conflict on a formal level. Both narrative and film style question social anxieties and issues of identity, history, and modernity.

Murray Leeder evokes "*a tradition of ghostly returns from the dead*" in the western genre. Focusing on Clint Eastwood's *High Plains Drifter* (USA, 1973), he examines the variety of sources which inspire the film's generic hybridity. His close reading of Eastwood's visual and auditive strategies reveals the fantastic as a disturbance within the generic space, relating it to a moment of crisis. The supernatural, relying on such Gothic devices as the exploration of darkness, calls into question the idea of America's innocence and challenges the myth of regeneration through violence without destroying it. Moreover, the narrative and formal recourse to supernatural visions establishes a link between the past – in historical and aesthetic terms – and the present (America and the war in Vietnam). Hannah Bayley's comparison of *Kairo* (Kiyoshi Kurosawa, Japan, 2001) and its re-make *Pulse* (Wes Craven, USA, 2006) reveals how culturally specific representations of ghosts "*inflect the effects of the rising importance of technology on everyday life in technologically advanced societies*". The examination of different narrative traditions and different portrayals of ghosts, and the way music and sound are used in the Japanese original and the American remake, offers insight into the ways in which technology undermines social cohesion through culturally determined means.