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Film Journal 5: Screening the Supernatural

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Robbie McAllister (Leeds Trinity University, UK)

Robbie McAllister is a Lecturer in Film at Leeds Trinity University. His PhD focused on a growing wave of ‘steampunk’ films that offer commentaries on modern technologies through forms of historical nostalgia where clockwork gadgets and steam-engines are retro-fitted into fantastical spectacles. These issues are re-worked in his book *Steampunk Film: A Critical Introduction* (2019) and are to be extended through a research project on ‘neo-Victorientalism’.

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Linda Sheppard teaches Film Studies as an Associate Tutor in the School of Art, Media, and American Studies at the University of East Anglia. Her research involves 1960s and 1970s horror cinema and how it informs discourses and debates surrounding modernist theory and the role of traditional religion in contemporary culture. She was previously a Part-Time Professor of Film and Media at Palomar College, an Assistant Film Curator at The Brooklyn Museum, a Development Assistant at Women Make Movies, and an Archival Assistant at The Andy Warhol Foundation.
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. References to the Gothic are at the heart of the work of 20th Century as different as Virginia Wolf, Samuel Beckett and Bret Easton Ellis. 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.”

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

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Kovacs, for her investigation of ghost figures in films from the 1930s to the 1990s. 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.

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. 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

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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.
The Clockwork Occult: Evaluating the Scientific Fantastic in Steampunk Cinema

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Introducing Steampunk

‘Steampunk’ is a term that has seen liberal use over the past two decades. Its cultural significance has developed well beyond its origins as a literary sub-genre of science fiction, becoming a retro-futuristic subculture in itself and a pop-cultural resource that has proved immensely successful within mainstream media. Whether represented through the pseudo-historical settings imagined within the movement’s literature, or by the distinctive aesthetic that has been applied to a litany of films, video-games, and artworks, steampunk’s millennial popularity can be evidenced through a widespread nostalgia for the technological materials of a previous age. “First and foremost, steampunk is about things – especially technological things – and our relationships to them”, writes Stefania Forlini, noting the many adherents who have played a role in physically constructing the movement’s imagined machinery, artists and designers who “produce fanciful Victorian-like gadgets [...] or refurbish contemporary technological objects to make them look and feel ‘Victorian’”.¹

Whilst many have explored the characteristics that have come to define steampunk as both a consumer and craft-orientated practice, much of the movement’s identity can be understood through its many representations of mechanical materiality that are placed within the contexts of magic and the supernatural. In whatever time-period steampunk technologies find themselves set, their identification is dependent upon their open defiance of common expectations of rationality and historical canonicity. As I will go on to explore, the anachronistic status of these machines allows steampunk to occupy a distinct position between conventions typically used to distinguish the fantasy and science fiction genres. Many theorists have attempted to highlight how the “imaginative or fantastic” realms of fantasy and science fiction similarly emphasise a “point [or points] of difference” between the world that we recognise as ‘ours’ and that which is imagined.² It is often assumed that the distinction between science fiction and fantasy approaches to this difference is centred upon the “imaginatively expansive, and materialist mode [of science fiction], as opposed to the magical-fantastic, fundamentally religious mode that comes to be known as fantasy”.³ The popular suggestion seems to be, therefore, that fantasy envisions acts that we know to be impossible, whilst science fiction imagines how the fantastic may be made actual (predominantly through technological means).

In this article I consider how steampunk cinema can be used to examine the complexities with which representations of both mechanical and magical acts are aligned with contemporary understandings of the world. These are the films that played a key role in bringing steampunk to the attention of mainstream audiences and popularised representations of an alternative industrial revolution where technological rationalities find themselves governed by fantastical impossibilities. From blockbuster juggernauts such as Sonnenfeld’s Wild Wild West (USA, 1999) – a film that allowed the genre to “go viral”⁴ – to the mechanical fetishisms of cult-favourite Dark City (Proyas, Australia/USA, 1998), steampunk’s faux-histories delight in reconfiguring our expectations concerning what is mechanically possible. Films like Coraci’s Around the World in 80 Days (USA/Germ/Ire/UK, 2004), Ritchie’s Sherlock Holmes (USA/Germ/UK, 2009), and Anderson’s The Three Musketeers (USA/Germ/Fr/UK, 2011) exemplify the film industry’s propensity to use the movement’s fantastical technologies to irreverently re-work beloved properties into special effects extravaganzas. Indeed, steampunk’s spectacularly antiquated inventions have acted as an apt fit for a medium born of a 19th Century innovation that has so frequently been termed as a “cinema of attractions”⁵, a technology designed to showcase scientific wizardry. I propose that steampunk cinema’s nostalgia for an age of past industry allows us to consider

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a number of debates that place mechanical ‘know-how’ at the very centre of the perceived struggle between empirical rationality and the unbound forces of supernaturalism.

**Impossible Machines**

It is worth noting that steampunk is not an exclusively neo-Victorian movement. Instead, the genre draws together machinery from a number of historical sources, imagining alternative visions of past, present and future where atavistic technologies have developed in place of their electronic and digital usurpers. Whether revisiting eras of industrial invention and imperial expansion in feature films such as Newman’s *The Adventurer: The Curse of the Midas Box* (UK/Sp/Belg, 2013) or imagining apocalyptic futures in a short such as Acker’s 9 (USA, 2005), steampunk exhibits an extremely playful and anachronistic relationship to historical periodisation. The genre’s films are united in their reinvention of machines that evoke the parameters of a broader conception of both late modernity and the long 19th Century. Rather than being set amongst the rolling hills of J. R. R. Tolkien, or C. S. Lewis’ fantastical realms of Middle Earth or Narnia, steampunk predominantly positions itself within metropolitan cityscapes. The genre’s narratives emphasise the popular mythology of modernity as an era when “*rationality and the irrationalities of myth, religion, [and] superstition*” would find themselves opposed.⁶

When re-imagining its eponymous detective as a turn-of-the-century action-adventurer through sensibilities more common to the super-hero franchise, *Sherlock Holmes*, for example, pits its hero against a villain who blurs the lines between magical and technological innovation. Holmes is placed in direct conflict with the evil machinations of Lord Blackwood, a self-proclaimed master of the occult who has seemingly risen from the dead to seize control of the British Empire. In the requisite maniacal monologue, Blackwood states that “tomorrow at noon, we take the first step towards a new chapter in our history. Magic will lead the way. Once the people of England see our newfound power they’ll bow down in fear... We will re-make the world. Create the future”. However, rather than depending upon black magic, this neo-Victorian narrative relies on steampunk gadgetry to showcase both Holmes’ and Blackwood’s genius, with the hero’s deductive abilities being required to uncover the mechanical apparatus that allows his opponent to complete his seemingly supernatural acts.

The film’s final confrontation sees Holmes battle Blackwood atop London’s Tower Bridge in mid-construction (upon completion in 1894, its bascules would be driven by steam and hydraulic motion), the fate of a modernising nation and its ever-developing industrial skyline hanging below them in the balance. Holmes and Blackwood represent quintessentially humanistic ideals as they struggle for power, control and, in no small measure, ego. Aesthetically, Holmes is evocative of Charles Baudelaire’s ‘modern hero’, kitted out in funereal frock-coat and the self-same depictions of modernity that have made such a great

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impact on the fashions of both the gothic and steampunk subcultures themselves: “an expression of the public soul – an immense cortège of undertaker’s mutes (mute in love, political mutes, bourgeois mutes [...] great colourists know how to create colour with a black coat, a white cravat and a grey background”.7

By affording its 21st Century audience the privilege of hindsight with regards to the possibilities of technological development, the film offers the pleasure of revisiting the fin de siècle optimisms and anxieties of a historical period where the boundaries of magic and science were being redrawn. Encompassing an assortment of engineers, mechanics, linguists, and scholars, steampunk’s protagonists embody what David Harvey defines as one of the primary tenets of “the modern project”: the desire to use “the accumulation of knowledge generated by many individuals working freely and creatively for the pursuit of human emancipation and the enrichment of daily life”.8 Shining a light into the darkness of superstition, these heroes are defined by their pursuit of both knowledge and reason. Similarly, the enemies of steampunk fiction are not leviathans, dragons, and demons, but are most frequently humans who wield mechanical power for their own purposes. The Adventurer: The Curse of the Midas Box is another example of steampunk cinema that sees its antagonist use technology to perform seemingly supernatural acts. In this case, the film’s hero reveals a demonic visage to be a great steampunk drilling machine – the fires of its engines acting as its eyes and maw.

Offering a variation of author Arthur C. Clarke’s frequently cited adage that “any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic”9, steampunk’s romantic attitude to machines that verge on the supernatural connects the genre to cinema’s own industrial heritage. Audiences are invited to enjoy and potentially ‘decrypt’ the many instances of CGI trickery that see period settings populated by overtly anachronistic technologies, drawing on a heritage of over a century of ‘magical’ prestidigitation within film. When Geoff King argues that modernity has often been perceived as reducing the world to “the realm of empirical facts”, he notes that the contemporary blockbuster possesses a similar function to that of the medium’s historical predecessors: that of magical re-enchantment.10 For the audiences of 18th Century scientific demonstrations, he writes, “such spectacles are experienced as quasi-magical, rather like cinematic special effects. The powers of science and technology appear to be a new form of magic”.11

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8 Harvey, The Condition of Postmodernity, p. 12.
11 King, Spectacular Narratives, p. 56.
Indeed, steampunk’s cinematic expressions of industrial power recall the illusions pioneered by the likes of Georges Méliès and the Lumière brothers. Scorsese’s Hugo (USA/UK/Fr, 2011), for example, uses its clockwork reconstruction of industrial spectacle to draw upon mythologised responses to screenings of the Lumière Brothers’ The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat Station (France, 1895). Celebrating cinema’s legacy as a machine through which the sublime wonders and terrors of the supernatural could find themselves technologically enacted, the effect of an unstoppable mechanical juggernaut driving headlong into an unsuspecting audience is recalled through Scorsese’s own arsenal of visual effects, re-imagined through millennial 3D technologies.

“Turning technology into a spectacle of light, sound, and power”\(^\text{12}\), many steampunk films use their mechanical centrepieces to explicitly draw associations between cinema and traditions of stage magic. Making apt use of the films’ status as special effects extravaganzas, characters are depicted as reeling from technologies that seem to defy credibility as they tower over the landscape. Wild Wild West’s enormous mechanical spider obliterates a number of American frontier towns with a volley of explosives, whilst similar examples spread across the entire steampunk genre, from an impossibly mammoth submarine (the Nautilus in Norrington’s The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen [USA/Germ/Czech/UK, 2003]) to a fleet of 17\(^{th}\) Century dirigibles (The Three Musketeers) to an army of clockwork giants (del Toro’s Hellboy II: The Golden Army [USA/Germ/Hung, 2008]). Visualised through a considerable depth-of-field to highlight their massiveness in contrast to their human witnesses, these machines act as analogues to the wonders of cinematic spectatorship.

Despite existing within alternative histories, these machines are not the norm in their respective societies. Instead, their status as being ‘out of time’ gives them a semblance of the supernatural which allows their anachronistic Otherness to be easily mistaken for magic, a notion that is informed by their spectacular visual presence and narrative agency. It is not accurate, however, to argue that steampunk’s representation of the fantastical is one where the supernatural is merely a mis-identified product of technological and scientific rationality. As I will now consider, many steampunk films depict their machines in relation to acts that are unquestionably of supernatural origin. In these cases, magic is not something to be mistaken for mechanical causality but a very real entity that is either hidden or in remission, threatened by the industrial marvels that signpost the birth of modernity.

The Defeat of Magic

Steampunk’s temporal dislocation of machinery throughout various periods in history has allowed its narratives to explore many different dichotomies: “utopian/dystopian;
Significantly, films in the genre often dramatise conflicts where supernatural forces are placed in direct confrontation with technological advances. Del Toro’s *Hellboy* (USA, 2004), and more specifically, his sequel, *Hellboy II: The Golden Army*, offer a number of particularly prominent examples of this opposition in action. More faithful to the fairy-tale vernacular associated with its director than to its comic book source, *Hellboy II* uses its steampunk conventions to depict a war between humans and elves that is staged across a number of different industrial phases. The past is used as a source of wonder and horror that lies beneath the materialistic veneer of our contemporary experience.

In *Hellboy II*, for example, the eponymous protagonist saves a modern and urban cityscape (in this case New York) from the Forest God, an elemental behemoth unleashed by his supernatural nemesis, the elven Prince Nuada. As a beast of demonic origin himself, Hellboy hesitates before administering the coup de grâce to this threat to contemporary America. The vengeful Prince taunts him with the finality of such an act: “*What are you waiting for? This is what you wanted, isn’t it? Look at it. The last of its kind .... Like you and I [sic]. You destroy it, the world will never see its like again.*” Yet the seeming divide between the technophobic elves (“*honourable, sincere, and purposeful*”) and technophilic humans (“*materialistic, power-hungry, fearful*”) is complicated by del Toro’s positioning of the elves as mechanically adept users of multiple steampunk devices.

The gulf between the elven forests and human cities is far from clear-cut, with the endangered fairy characters relocating their royal court to a machine-workshop and furnace-room that acts as a sanctuary positioned between the elven and human realms. Simultaneously reflective of both the mechanised conquest of the faerie kingdom and a bygone era of industrial production, these machines afford the elven king a world that is bound to – and simultaneously separate from – contemporary technological developments. The king’s throne is embedded in the pipework of a colossal furnace, the glowing heat from its port-hole accentuating the fairy monarch’s ethereal and magical identity. Similarly, the structure’s rusted metal reminds us of the earth tones and tree bark that have also been abandoned by contemporary human civilisation. Typical of the atavistic production design associated with the del Toro oeuvre, the film’s steampunk identity reflects a nostalgia not only for the fading wilderness, but also for ‘lost’ archaic technologies and communities. The elven acceptance of clockwork and metallurgy foregrounds the genre’s anachronistic devices as gateways between a natural past and digitised present.

The investment of supernatural romanticism within technologies that have seemingly not yet been perverted by the mechanisation of 20th Century warfare and postmodern consumer

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culture is common to much of the broader steampunk genre. While Weitz’s *The Golden Compass* (UK/USA, 2007) would, for example, be unfavourably compared to its literary source (by both numerous critics and even its director), it remains a notable example of steampunk cinema’s machines being valued through their relationship to magical practices. Many of the film’s more fantastic and antiquated technologies are depicted with a reverence similar to that of del Toro’s elves; devices such as an ‘alethiometer’ (the film’s titular compass), and a haphazardly constructed airship owned by an aeronautical companion, act as quintessentially steampunk designs that aid the film’s heroine in her journey. Far more threatening is the ‘intercision’ machine that the villainous Magisterium use to separate children from their daemons, spirits that take the form of animal companions. In comparison to the neo-Victorian aesthetic used to render the film’s romanticised technologies, the design used to depict a machine capable of desecrating the human interconnectedness with the spiritual is far more evocative of 20th Century design and minimalist modernism – a sleek black cage with no visible mechanical workings, sat within a sterile white room.

Steampunk cinema’s production design invites us to imagine a mechanical modernity that has passed into the realm of nostalgia and is still capable of being informed by the beauty and dangers often attributed to magical heirlooms and artefacts. The genre acts as a millennial continuation of similar concerns encountered by the Victorians themselves: as Paul Aklon notes, “a looming problem for writers in the nineteenth century was how to achieve sublimity without recourse to the supernatural. In 1819 John Keats famously complained in ‘Lamia’ that science was emptying the haunted air. The supernatural marvels that had been a staple of epic and lesser forms from Homeric times would no longer do as the best sources of sublimity”. Steampunk technologies, therefore, often play the role as usurpers of magical traditions – machines that are capable of fulfilling many of the same functions as the supernatural forces that acted as their predecessors. However, these devices do not solely represent what Adam Roberts describes as a requirement of science fiction to depend on “physical rationalisation, rather than a supernatural or arbitrary one”. Instead of completely renouncing the supernatural, steampunk acts as a direct means of complicating the apparent divide between mechanical causality and fantastical impossibility, as many of the genre’s technologies can be defined through their unquestionably magical properties.

**Mechanising Magic**

The most fundamental component shared by steampunk’s representations of technology is their fantastically anachronistic status. Many of the genre’s machines can not only be defined by the fact that they have been temporally relocated into alien eras, but also by their

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seemingly indivisible relationship to magic; not the product of rational reasoning, but fantastical impossibilities that 21st Century viewers recognise as truly extraordinary. Ann Heilmann considers this specifically from a neo-Victorian perspective when she aligns the movement’s authors and directors with the roles of conjurers and stage magicians. “In both magic shows and cinema”, she writes, “the audience is aware of the artificiality of the act, yet judge the quality of the performance by its ability to deceive and mystify us”. This is a notion inherent in steampunk’s anachronisms, as contemporary audiences have their understandings of technological causality severely ruptured. Heilmann turns to Christopher Nolan’s The Prestige (USA/UK, 2006) as an exemplar of neo-Victorian performance, but we might equally consider the text as a product of quintessentially steampunk design. The connections between technology and magic lie at the centre of the film’s narrative, where the rivalry of stage-magicians Alfred Borden and Robert Angier is contrasted with electrical pioneers Nikola Tesla and Thomas Edison—wizards of an alternative kind.

The narrative’s centrepiece is a “quasi-Frankensteinian electrical apparatus” designed by Tesla, that allows Angier to perform a trick that requires him to appear as if he has magically transported himself to a nearby location. Tesla’s machine fulfils its purpose, creating an exact duplicate of Angier that allows him to perform the feat with his newly generated double. Considered separately by both mentor John Cutter and theatrical agent Ackerman as being “real magic”, Tesla’s remarkable machine is the only component of The Prestige’s story that is presented as overtly fantastical, deliberately countering its audience’s expectations of the scientifically possible. Whilst Angier’s neo-Victorian spectators witness an act that is the product of technology’s unbound potential (it is after all a feat titled “The Real Transported Man”), the film’s 21st Century audience’s understanding of historical, technological and generic expectations is shattered: the mechanical action is completely out of sync with the depicted period. As Miller and van Riper suggest, “the powers [steampunk’s] extraordinary machines exhibit are so far beyond the capabilities of contemporary technology as to seem purely magical”. It is The Prestige’s status as a steampunk text that allows Tesla’s mysterious cabinet to function as a performance of both science and magic, drawing parallels between the knowledge (and awestruck responses) of both 19th and 21st Century audiences.

This is true not only of The Prestige, but the steampunk genre as a whole. Alice Bell defines the invention of the ‘steamball’ within Katsuhiro Ōtomo’s Steamboy (Jap, 2004) as “semi-mystical”, whilst Tim Blackmore describes the retro-futuristic machines within Dark City as “apparently magical”. An excellent example of steampunk cinema’s blurring of

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Science as magic can be observed through the genre’s repeated representation of the mythos of flight, an act that is now an everyday occurrence but was once pure fantasy. Whether drifting upon airships or glider-mounted bicycles, the heroes of steampunk films such as Matthew Vaughn’s *Stardust* (UK/USA, 2007), *The Three Musketeers*, *The Golden Compass*, *Wild Wild West* and *Around the World in 80 Days* all anachronistically depict the discovery or proliferation of a new form of flight as a central mechanism of the narrative and/or action. It is certainly not surprising, considering the fact that airships “endow the most ordinary of settings with an air of spectacle”23, easily injecting increased levels of danger and exhilaration into the genre’s action sequences.

Cynthia Miller specifically associates the magical spectacle of steampunk with “the rise of technologies of flight... both as response to a collective yearning for magic and magical in its own right, casting scientists and engineers as modern-day magicians”. This is certainly true of the movement’s cinematic protagonists who (like Tesla in *The Prestige*) seem to bridge the divide between sorcerer and scientist. In *Around the World in 80 Days*, Steve Coogan’s Phileas Fogg is recast as the mad-cap inventor of a number of extraordinary contraptions, an eccentric who is seen not as an enemy to imaginative flights of fancy, but a proponent of the scientific-fantastic. Steampunk heroes such as Fogg utilise technology to achieve extraordinary feats that are as wondrous to their 19th century contemporaries as they are to their 21st century film audiences.

Significantly, the genre’s depictions of fantastical anachronisms act as more than decorative baubles, drawing upon the shared understandings that we use to define both supernatural and rational causalities. As with the technology of science fiction, proposes Vivian Sobchack, “*magic, like science, depends on process and product*”.24 Just as magic’s seeming irrationalism is frequently standardised within our various fictions – from itemising the ingredients of a witch’s brew in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* (don’t forget your “finger of birth-strangled babe”)25 to the proper phonetics of an incantation in Chris Columbus’s *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* (UK/USA, 2001) – “It’s ‘leviosa’, not ‘levi-oh-sar’” – steampunk’s fantastical technologies are able to perform seemingly impossible acts through imagined processes of measurable causality.

This can be directly observed through the emphasis on transparency associated with the workings of steampunk machines as they complete fantastical (and often remarkably absurd) acts. Unlike the enclosed and hermetically sealed digital devices of the 21st Century, audiences are allowed to marvel at the interconnected cogs and pulleys that cause these machines to function. The impossible qualities of H.G. Wells’ time machine are only emphasised by the exploded view of rotary motion and gilded sprockets that bring it to life on-screen (in both

1960 and 2002 versions). Similarly, when both Nolan’s and Angier’s audiences are invited to view the magical cabinet at the heart of The Prestige, it is stripped of its shell, a mass of uncoiled wires and electrodes laid bare on stage. Their transparency may make these machines seem enormously complex and intricate (foregrounding their impossibility), yet this emphasis on their inner workings also presents them as technologies that can be comprehended, taken apart, and then, if needs be, re-assembled. The effect is not dissimilar to the witches’ brew in Macbeth, where pleasure is offered in imagining how such a magical act might be made possible through systems of cause and effect.

For Tzvetan Todorov, the fantastic exists within a state of hesitancy, where both characters and readers are unaware of the laws that govern the fiction’s diegetic reality; “uncanny” if rationalised by our native understanding of the world and “marvellous” if governed by an invented and fundamentally supernatural order. Steampunk’s fantastical status emphasises how complex it can be to define this process of recognition within simple generic parameters, as the films often depict supernatural acts that are eventually revealed to be technologies dependent on coherent rationalities, while at other times representing machines that appear to follow no natural order at all, driven by utterly alien (or simply unexplained) systems of cause and effect. What remains cohesive amongst steampunk films is the demand that audiences recognise the dramatically reassembled nature of their alternative histories and – whether or not the mechanical processes of their fantastical machines are understood – that they are defined by both their commonalities and differences in relation to actual period technologies.

Just as Todorov suggests that the fantastic is determined by a reader’s textual positioning, steampunk cinema’s representations of both magical and actual rationalities are dependent on its audience’s recognition of its films’ production processes. It is notable that many steampunk films that dramatise “the retreat of magic” (which Martin Rusnak identifies in respect of Stardust) represent these supernatural and decidedly non-mechanical acts through cutting-edge methods of digital construction that differ greatly from the worn and aged aesthetic attributed to steampunk’s machinery. Rather than emulating physical manufacturing techniques, the aesthetic used to depict supernatural forces becomes intrinsically connected with the electronic advances of more recent decades. In two of the Disney millennial features, Atlantis: The Lost Empire (Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise, USA, 2001) and Treasure Planet (Ron Clements and John Musker, USA, 2002), steampunk conventions are used to both dramatise and weather the storms of technological change that were re-shaping the animation industry at the point of their production. Depicting an early 20th Century expedition to discover the mysterious powers of the eponymous underwater city, Atlantis uses an assortment of fantastical technologies that are typical in tales of the

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colonial steampunk adventurer. The protagonist’s boon is ‘the heart of Atlantis’, a mysterious technology that represents the power of this ancient civilisation. Quite distinct from the whirring gears of the hero’s steampunk machinery, this translucent crystal possesses no working components, and simply radiates a powerful blast of light to perform its fantastical acts.

In a film which mixes traditional animation techniques with computer-generated imagery (in a similar manner to its successor, Treasure Planet), the digital effects in Atlantis mirror the characteristics of the crystal’s own technological workings: invisible and devoid of the accountable evidence of construction and use that mark both hand-drawn animation and steampunk technologies. The film’s magical effects act not only as an analogy for primeval supernaturalism, but also for the power of new advances in film-making, reflecting the developments in virtuality that the studio was itself attempting to navigate. The steampunk identity of Atlantis actively encourages its audience to engage with new forms of film-making and animation as a re-kindled form of magic – where shifts in industrial practice are tempered by the spectacular future-pasts envisioned through Disney’s corporate imagineering.

Another steampunk production to feature characters who use rusted and creaking machines to unearth ‘magical’ objects that bear a resemblance to our own contemporary devices is The Adventurer: The Curse of the Midas Box. In this film the villainous Otto Luger uses his own array of steampunk devices to acquire an ancient technology that (like the heart of Atlantis) radiates unearthly light to perform impossible tasks. Foregrounding the genre’s unusual relationship to both past and future, this antique weapon looks more science-fictional than historical, an energy blaster of sleek gold that is a far cry from the colossal rotating gears, pipe-works, and engines that constitute Luger’s own neo-Victorian setting. Like the effects of both Atlantis and The Prestige (with its digitally constructed arcing electrodes), such seemingly magical technologies act as analogues to the very same contemporary techniques through which they are produced. They represent not only the 19th Century’s mythical past, but the science-fictional futures that modern audiences now inhabit: Neo-Victorian magic has become 21st Century fact.

The Magic of Technology: Oz the Great and Powerful

Steampunk has become a popular resource for a number of conglomerate studios to mythologise cinema as a technology of magical spectacle, with Sam Raimi’s Oz the Great and Powerful (USA, 2013) an eminent example. Despite the film’s lacklustre critical reception, Oz the Great and Powerful possesses (like many steampunk productions) considerable value in evidencing how the film industry has used steampunk machines to position the medium of cinema amongst representations of both mechanical and magical rationalities. Continuing the retro-futuristic traditions of steampunk, this adaptation of L. Frank Baum’s fictional realm of Oz not only acts as a corporate re-branding of a revered cultural classic (both as children’s book series and 1939 MGM adaptation), but also a ‘steampunked’ re-imagining that echoes the techno-fantasy stylings of Disney’s earlier Return to Oz (Murch, UK/USA, 1985).
Perhaps best regarded as a successor to Disney’s other computer-generated/live-action adaptation Alice in Wonderland (Burton, USA, 2010), Oz the Great and the Powerful uses its steampunk identity to position director and studio alike as masters of mechanical wizardry. To understand such industrial self-promotion, we can observe the character of Oz himself: a protagonist who in L. Frank Baum’s novel The Wonderful Wizard of Oz (1900) and Fleming’s film The Wizard of Oz (USA, 1939) is regarded as the finest and most sensational mage in all the land. In perhaps one of the most famous fictional examples of a seemingly magical entity being debunked, Oz’s magic is revealed to be fraudulent. Yet although Oz is presented as more scientist than sorcerer, unquestionably supernatural acts are frequently depicted within Baum’s fictional realm. The villainous Wicked Witch is perhaps the most impressive performer of such arcane feats, although it is ultimately Oz’s humanistic reasoning that gives Dorothy and her companions the assistance which they need in order to see their quest to its completion. Oz the Great and Powerful acts as a prequel to these events, depicting the origin of this charlatan-magician. In doing so, the film actively employs steampunk conventions to highlight cinema’s role as a mediator between perceptions of science and magic.

Tapping into the cinematic imagery with which both reality and fantasy are so frequently represented, this 2013 production repeats and extends its predecessor’s shift from black-and-white into colour, revealing 3D technologies and an expansion from a standard ratio to widescreen in order to contrast the mundanity of Kansas with the magical wonder of Oz. Yet it is the character of Oz himself that is used to manoeuvre steampunk’s traditions into this text, depicted as a figure who uses his knowledge of turn-of-the-century machinery to perform feats that seem miraculous to the denizens of this fantastical land. Oz’s technological proficiency makes him paradoxically extraordinary in a world that depends solely on magic, and when the Wicked Witch’s supernatural forces lay siege to the Emerald City, Oz finds himself having to modernise and industrialise his new home if he is to repel the invading forces. For both the people of Oz and Raimi’s own contemporary audience, technology must be re-enchanted and take on the form and presence of magic itself.

Equipping himself with the accoutrements of steampunk, Oz draws down his goggles and sets about industrialising this magical city, putting the population to work on Fordian production lines. The result is the construction of a giant projector within which Oz is able to house himself. Unmistakably steampunk in design, this machine utilises a cornucopia of gears, levers and pulleys to allow Oz to simultaneously act as projectionist, performer, and director, marvelling at the editing tricks and lenses that bring him in and out of focus as he does so. This contraption mimics and magnifies the imagery of the film’s 1939 predecessor, projecting Oz’s face upon the backdrop of Emerald City’s skyline in an urban performance of truly metropolitan scale. In a grand show of technological force, Oz’s own faux-supernatural presence is constructed through a quite literal display of smoke and mirrors, making him seem impervious to both a volley of spears and genuine magical attacks. Oz the Great and Powerful uses its hero’s scientific spectacle to remind audiences of Disney’s performative power and
to reassure them that true magic (or at least, the closest thing to it) can still be acquired through the technological innovation and nostalgic fetishism of cinema in which it specialises.

Emblematic of the role that steampunk has come to play in modern cinema, Oz the Great and Powerful highlights a romantic preoccupation with potentially low-cultural theatrics; re-imagined through blockbusters that similarly demand technological upheaval for the creation of more and more extravagant spectacles. As John C. Tibbetts writes of Karel Zeman, an adaptor of Victorian science fiction responsible for many of steampunk’s proto-texts, “Zeman envisioned the film apparatus itself as a kind of steampunk machine, whose mechanism of intermittent movements, interlocking cogs, gears, and escapement, transforms through the agency of light and chemistry Verne’s printed page into celluloid fantasies that move and dream.” 28 When the fictional Oz discusses his own dreams and aspirations, he activates a zoetrope, casting the image of a dancing elephant upon the walls that surround him. It is the technological mythology of cinema that is recalled when he states: “I want to be Harry Houdini and Thomas Edison all rolled into one”. This aspirational co-mingling of both theatrical and technological performance offers direct comparison with the popular mythology associated with the work of Méliès and other film-makers of the early period. As Brigitte Peucker comments: “Méliès presents himself repeatedly as a conjurer or illusionist, often in conjunction with machinery of various kinds, thus drawing attention to a need to situate himself within the spheres of technology and imagination that together define cinema”. 29

In its displaced, conflated depiction of rationalised modernity, the steampunk blockbuster attempts to trade upon the pedigree of its heritage and re-humanise an era of technological change that is as disorientating now as it was to the spectators of the Lumière’s steam train. The genre’s devotion to its wondrous machines reflects the cultural mystique that surrounds a technology of sound and vision that has been used to package our dreams and sell them back to us on an industrial scale. “The cinema is a Fetish Machine par-excellence”, propose Mirko M. Hall and Joshua Gunn with reference to the spectacle of the steampunk blockbuster, “generating an experience that we know is the product of a complex, technically administered mode of production that still has the power to enchant us and make ‘the impossible’ real”. 30 If the fantastic is indeed defined by “an event [that] occurs for which it is difficult to find a natural explanation” 31, then it is the subversion of an audience’s understanding of industrial development that allows steampunk’s mis-remembered representations of history to function.

While paradoxically dramatising the demise of the supernatural, steampunk exists within a science-fictional tradition of imbuing privileged representations of science and technology with the sublime and fantastic qualities associated with magic and spirituality. By anachronistically conflating contemporary understandings of machinery with fantastical depictions of the past, the genre’s machines fetishise the industrial revolution as both a period of magical defeat and yet also one of magical transference, where technologies that still seem capable of evoking uncanny or marvellous characteristics have inherited the responsibility of enacting our desire to be both awed and delighted by the supernatural. Furthermore, it is my contention that steampunk cinema’s cultural significance reflects the industrial history of a medium defined within the traditions of magic, stagecraft, and performance: methods of production that Geoff King defines through the notion of “magical spectacle” – “the basis of the appeal of the modern magic trick ... ranging from the nineteenth-century diorama to contemporary science fiction cinema”. By turning to the extravagances of both the movement’s period and science-fictional legacies, steampunk’s alternative histories have become an appropriate forum for the exploration and enactment of the industrial upheavals that can be traced across a century or more of film history.

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32 King, Spectacular Narratives, p. 55.
Phantasmagoria, Spectrality, and Illusion in Oz the Great and Powerful

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This article explores Sam Raimi’s Oz the Great and Powerful (USA, 2013) with reference to the history of phantasmagoric shows.1 Here the dynamic of Enlightenment rationalism and romantic faith in the supernatural is confronted by the opposition between the archetypal fairy-tale wizard and the figure of an illusionist who takes advantage of technology and science to make his spectators believe in the power of the supernatural. In Raimi’s film Oscar (played by James Franco) is a prestidigitator who enters the imaginary world of Oz by accident and becomes involved in a struggle with the Wicked Witches Evanora (Rachel Weisz) and Theodora (Mia Kunis). Although Oscar, whose stage name is ‘Oz’, does not possess any magical powers, he succeeds in confronting the two evil sisters. Based on pre-cinema inventions and discoveries, his “greatest trick ever” is in fact a modern incarnation of phantasmagoria shows whose origin dates back to the 18th Century.

1 This article has been developed from Justyna Hanna Budzik, Filmowe cuda i sztuczki magiczne Szkice z Archeologii kina [Film Miracles and Magic Tricks: Sketches from the Archaeology of Cinema], Katowice: University of Silesia Press, 2015, pp. 51–75.
The words Oscar utters to Glinda (Michelle Wellman), “I might not be the wizard you expected, but I might be the wizard that you need”, denote his virtuosity in prestidigitation as a skill required to defeat the Wicked Witches. The tension between rational knowledge and irrational belief in the miraculous, observed in the phantasmagoria shows of Robertson, is a key element of the pivotal scene in Raimi’s film, involving the most wonderful trick ever performed in the Emerald City. I offer a detailed examination of this scene, placing it in the context of the debate on phantasmagoria in media history, involving, among others, Tom Gunning, Terry Castle and Dan North. The topic of the magical and the miraculous in film, as presented and discussed in Edgar Morin’s writings on the double and the spectre, are also considered and will serve as the starting point for a broader reflection upon a popular fairy-tale film as a self-referential image of cinema archaeology.

The film derives from Lyman Frank Baum’s novel The Wonderful Wizard of Oz, published in 1900, a landmark book for children and an important contribution to the fantasy genre, and might be seen as a prequel to Fleming’s The Wizard of Oz (USA, 1939). At the end of Baum’s tale about the adventures of Dorothy Gale, the dog Toto, Scarecrow, the Tin Woodman and the Cowardly Lion in the fairyland of Oz, the characters make an earth-shattering discovery: the powerful wizard ruling the Emerald City, who evokes both fear and respect for his wisdom and his power to fulfil good wishes, turns out to be a charlatan. The wizard appeared as a different figure to each of the literary characters: for Dorothy he is a giant head, for the Scarecrow a beautiful lady, for the Tin Woodman a beast, and for the Lion a magical ball of fire. Yet, after accomplishing their mission to destroy the Wicked Witch of the West the characters accidentally discover the magician’s hideout in the throne room, where he presents himself as a voice, and they see “standing in just the spot the screen had hidden, a little old man, with a bald head and a wrinkled face, who seemed to be as much surprised as they were.”² It turns out that Oz is, in fact, an illusionist, a circus performer who once came by chance to the Land of Oz in a hot air balloon.

Raimi’s film tells the story of how Oscar, a showy hack conjurer from Kansas, arrives in the fairyland of Oz where, after numerous adventures, he becomes the Wizard residing in the Emerald City palace. The director borrows the idea of the balloon flight from the novel and somewhat develops the protagonist’s history before his arrival in the Land of Oz. The film character of Oz embodies the most important features of stage magicians from the late 19th Century. The protagonist also uses language drawn from that of the first theoreticians of cinema, who saw moving images as representation of dreams, ghosts, and supernatural reality. The thread concerning Oz and his “greatest trick” is an interesting and perverse approach to the problem of projection art at the intersection of discussions on magic and illusion to be found in the writings of, among others, Georges Méliès and Edgar Morin.

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Apparatuses producing optical illusions are not only gadgets of the era in Raimi’s film, they are also examples of media which activate various cultural strategies—from the entertainment value inherent in the discovery of technologies capable of deluding and deceiving the eye, to the fear of phantoms hidden in the viewer’s inner world.

The opening credits, a masterpiece of animation, announce the major role which will be played by the machinery for producing illusions. In perfectly illusory spatial depth, reminiscent of Baroque trompe l’œil paintings, curtains go up revealing stages where wings and painted backgrounds suggest the enfilade structure of an infinite number of theatres. Just before the credit to Franco appears on the screen, a trapdoor opens in the stage floor and the figure of an illusionist jumps out, a wand in his raised hand. With his back to the audience, he casts a shadow on the background landscape. Such a prefiguration of the main character evokes the effect of uncertainty and mystery (his face is invisible), and invokes the world of dark fantasy. The shadow is one of the forms of the double in Edgar Morin’s reflection upon the magical nature of cinematic projection. Morin uses the notion of the double to describe an image which lacks its material base, a phantom which encompasses features of a mental picture—real and surreal at the same time. The shadow, connected with night and death, is the most magical form of the double.

These theatrical devices remind us that that the trick effect results from a skilful application of mechanics designed to deceive the senses, to surprise and to amaze. In addition, animated images in the opening credits make use of optical illusions such as spirals or spinning wheels painted in contrasting patterns to finally present the image of an eye, prior to the naming of the visual effects supervisor, Scott Stokdyk. The director’s name, for its part, is placed in a crystal ball held by clawed hands, as if Raimi is being associated with fairy-tale wizards whose power is capable of creating fantastic visions. The audience is thus prepared for a spectacle of illusions. The film draws the viewer into the realm of optical devices, and the ways in which they enable us to see that which is impossible, in the form of images which can hardly be real but which nonetheless have the ability to outwit common sense. Such a strategy for arousing the viewer’s interest in a spectacle created with the help of machines is reminiscent of the world fairs at the turn of the 20th Century where technological innovations were the main attraction. The opening credits also prefigure the film’s narrative development, where illusion-creating machines play a pivotal role in the development of the story.

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Oscar belongs to the historical world of fairs, illusionist shows, and prestidigitator performances. He represents the epoch of the first years of cinematographic spectacles in which stage magicians relied on new image-producing machines to make their performance more attractive, the first of these being the ‘theatrograph’, constructed by R.W. Paul and purchased by the American illusionist Carl Hertz in March 1896. In the era of both media convergence and also the constant expansion of audio-visual theory, however, the figure of Oz may also be seen as the embodiment of discourses on the various relations between cinematic projection and magic, faith in doubles and shadows, fear of the miraculous and the unusual, as well as the pleasure of visual attraction based on surprising and astonishing images. Oscar is portrayed as a prestidigitator-artisan who masters the craft of the stage illusionist. He is equally fluent in the techniques of deceiving and seducing women. In the second sequence of the film, after the magician has been announced by a ringmaster at the fair, he is shown in conversation with his naïve assistant. The young woman, fascinated by the handsome and talented Oscar, lets him beguile her with his tricks. We struggle to like Oscar – described as great and powerful by his assistant – as, from the very beginning, he is shown to be at least ambiguous in terms of ethics and morality.

The construction of the story follows a basic narrative pattern: the protagonist has a mission to fulfil, in Oscar’s case, to free the Land of Oz from the rule of the Wicked Witch (in the course of the film it turns out that there are in fact two Wicked Witches). The inhabitants of the magic land believe in the truth of the prophecy which foretells that one day a powerful wizard will come, defeat the forces of evil, and restore harmony. The problem is that Oz is not a wizard: he does not possess supernatural powers – as he indeed mentions several times, for instance, while he is trying to convince Glinda: “I might not actually be a wizard you are expecting”. The young stage illusionist is fully aware of the fact that he finds himself in a fantasy world where “true” magic occurs, whereas he himself can only produce illusions, manipulating the audience by persuading it to see something which does not exist. He is a master of tricks, and it takes more than a trick to defeat evil in the world of the fairy-tale. And yet eventually a perfectly planned spectacle of illusion will give the protagonist victory; his outstanding knowledge of optical and projection devices can indeed be used instead of magic. The effects of Oz’s “greatest trick” will be the culmination of both the fantasy convention of fulfilling a mission without the help of magical powers, and the fairy-tale tradition of the protagonist’s transformation, leading to the eventual triumph of good over evil.

Where the optical spectacle of magic and illusion is concerned, three sequences are crucial: the illusionist’s show in Kansas at the beginning of the film, Oscar’s conversation

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with China Girl in the Land of Oz, and the showpiece with the false wizard. Two sequences are symmetrical with one another, both leading to a dramatic turn of events: after the unsuccessful show in Kansas, Oscar escapes in a hot air balloon, which carries him to the Land of Oz, where he gains the love of Glinda and the respect of his faithful audience, whereas following the spectacle in the Emerald City the Wicked Witches, Evanora and Theodora, flee. Each show reveals various possible ways of perceiving the performance of an illusion, and the reactions of the film audience may be understood as an exemplification of historical and anthropological studies on the reception of magic shows. The illusionist show performed by Oz is a typical example of a performance from the late 19th Century. The artist, using magical tricks such as that of the floating lady, is a master manipulator. However, a certain anachronism is present in the film portrait of the audience in Kansas. According to historians of the spectacle, the viewers of magical shows were aware of the illusory nature of the tricks being presented, and the pleasure of watching the show was derived from their assessment of the magician’s technical skills. The essence of the show was to deceive the sense of sight; viewers valued the show precisely if they were unable to uncover the principles governing the operation of the trick. Of course, magicians hid and protected their technological arsenal from the public, but the deception upon which their shows was based was never questioned.⁶

Oscar’s show, however, is different, and the audience in the film seems somewhat more naïve than the educated Victorian viewers described by North. The aggressive reaction of the viewers towards the fact that the strings used during the floating lady trick are visible could be explained by their disappointment with the low quality of the spectacle, yet further developments cause a surprising plot twist. After cutting the strings, Oscar’s assistant is still floating above the stage, and the audience is once again intrigued. The greatest amazement, combined with fear, is seen on the face of a disabled girl who cannot restrain her emotions and shouts out, “Make me walk!” The girl is joined by her parents, poor people who are ready to give all that they have to the stage illusionist so that he may help cure their daughter. The other viewers support the girl’s dramatic request and Oscar finds himself unable to confess that the magic spectacle is after all based on trickery. The protagonist is trying at all costs to retain the viewers’ faith in the truthfulness of his show. This anachronism plays an important role in a dramaturgy relying on elements drawn from the fairy-tale and fantasy genres. Oscar’s helpless explanations that he could make her walk again, but not at that very moment, are mirrored in his later conversation with China Girl (the disabled girl and the voice of China Girl are both played by the same actress). In the latter situation, Oz can admit that he does not perform miracles, and that he is therefore not the wizard awaited by the inhabitants of the enchanted world.

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The conversation with China Girl, however, inspires Oz to invent his greatest ever trick in order to free the Land of Oz from the rule of the Wicked Witches. The girl tells Oscar that the previous wizard – the witches’ father – could fulfil wishes provided they were good. Oscar responds that real magicians do not exist in the place from which he comes. He ponders a moment, however, and begins to talk about one – Thomas Alva Edison – who “could consider the future and make it real”. Oscar describes Edison’s most interesting invention, a device to register moving images, delighting the girl with the story. In the land of fairy-tale, somebody who can create the real from the impossible by means of glass and cable is also a wizard: the fragile, fantasy character convinces Oz that he must indeed be just such a one. The trust the little creature places in him, together with the illusionist’s technical skills, result in a wonderful idea for the most astonishing spectacle of optical magic ever to be presented in the Emerald City.

While gaining experience as a stage illusionist, he learned how to manipulate optical devices, and he intends to use this skill to create a new show. He references the praxinoscope as an inspiration for his own device. The praxinoscope, designed by Emile Renoir in 1876, was a modification of the zoetrope.⁷ Renoir closed the apertures in the external drum and placed little mirrors in the internal drum which reflected the pictures located along the outer circumference. The observer focused his attention on the mirrors which became the screen for an animated sequence. The inventor subsequently developed several new versions of the device in an attempt to separate the optical illusion from the apparatus. Because of this separation, the device was gradually removed from the field of vision of the audience.

The machine which Oscar commissions from Master Tinker resembles one of the later versions of the praxinoscope, the Théâtre Optique, introduced in 1892.⁸ In this version the praxinoscope was supplemented by a magic lantern projector. The system of double projection cast a static background and animated pictures on the screen, with the apparatus hidden from the spectators who visited the Musée Grévin in Paris to watch the shows in a darkened room. Almost a century earlier they had visited the Pavillon de l’Echiquier, where Etienne-Gaspard Robert, better known under his stage name ‘Robertson’, had organised phantasmagoria shows since 1798. (The protagonist of Raimi’s film and Robertson have one

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more thing in common, namely, travelling in a hot air balloon; Robertson was best known for being an outstanding aeronaut who set a height record for flying a hot air balloon.)

Phantasm of light, moving in space, approaching and talking to the audience, generated fear and disbelief – similar to the feelings experienced by the Wicked Witches and the inhabitants of the Emerald City in the course of the spectacle organised by Oscar. The skills which transform the protagonist into the hero needed by Glinda and her people are mainly connected with his mastery of staging phantasmagoria shows. The operation of the praxinoscope was based on the animation of still images presenting successive phases of movement. The primary function of the device – the illusion of smooth motion based on single static images – does not change during the subsequent modifications of the invention which, despite rendering the projection event similar to the conditions of phantasmagoria shows, do not produce the effect of the uncanny and the magical experienced by the spectators of the shows in the late 18th Century.

The functions fulfilled by phantasmagoria shows have been extensively described, from a Cultural Studies perspective, by Terry Castle, Tom Gunning and Tomasz Majewski. In my analysis of Oz the Great and Powerful, I will present different meanings of the term ‘phantasmagoria’: the showing of images projected by means of a hidden magic lantern; the effect of phantom images shows in relation to the spectators’ psyche (Castle); the notions of illusion and deception associated with Benjamin and Adorno; a product which hides the way of its production (Marx); an uncanny, supernatural phenomenon. According to Majewski, the phantasmagoria became “a cultural replacement of black magic” in the modern era. It is visible in an etymology rooted in the Greek words phantasma, phantazo, agoreno, agora, and means “the public calling of the ghosts”.

The world of the cinematic Land of Oz lies beyond civilisation as we know it, yet the illusionist’s activity refers to a ground-breaking moment in Western culture which “is enriched by phantasmagoria, with a post-Enlightenment transformation of scientific and technical inventions into entertainment devices”. Majewski remarks that “they are among the first observable cases of the saturation of scientific achievements with irrational content”. Oscar, like Robertson, does not conceal his fascination with technology and modern inventions. At the moment when he presents his plan of action to Glinda he points to a stage magic textbook as a primary source of reference for his idea. “Illusion, misdirects,

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11 Majewski, Dialektyczne feerie, p. 27.
12 Majewski, Dialektyczne feerie, p. 35.
“sleight of hand” – Oz enumerates knowledge included in the book which will help him win the battle. He designs a machine which, by means of a system of magic lantern, lenses, mirrors, sound amplifiers and a device producing smoke, will enable the projection of a giant speaking phantasm. “A conman, a trickster” – this is how the protagonist identifies himself as an expert manipulator of the techniques of illusion.

It is worth noting that Robertson also emphasized his technical competencies, introducing himself in the press and in advertisements as “mechanic, painter and optician” in an attempt to establish the rational nature of his artistry. Oscar also reveals his economic and social motivation – a desire to be promoted and famous. He is a skilful craftsman and a talented performer, perfectly suited to his profession. Moreover, he realizes the great possibilities of illusionist art. And here he again uses “a powerful spectatorial effect” produced by phantasmagoria understood as the combination of an optical illusion and the psychological experience of a phantasm. Oz’s phantasmagoria, however, functions rather differently from those to be found in European culture at the turn of the 19th Century, and the way the show was incorporated into the fabric of the film complicates its structure and makes spectators reflect on the nature of cinematic projection itself.

An essential element of Robertson’s shows was that he divided them into two parts: an exhibition of optical devices, which was available to the spectators before the actual show, and a spectacle of phantasms in a darkened room with a curtain. So, before the audience could enjoy the immersive activity of sensually experiencing luminous phantasms, they had already visited the exposition devoted to technological possibilities for producing illusions, reflecting a post-Enlightenment aspiration to embed phantasmagoria in a scientific model for exploring the world. Despite this, illusionists were greatly concerned with the magical aura of their shows: they started by convincing spectators that the belief in ghosts was a mere superstition and then produced ghosts which were so realistic that the spectators began to believe in them all over again. Similarly, Oz does not exhibit a purely scientific attitude: the way he describes Edison’s achievements reveals an (unconscious?) inclination of the protagonist (and people in general) to think about optical and electrical inventions in terms of magical phenomena. Perhaps it is unveiled because of his contact with the fantasy world and with the people of Oz, who find magic an obvious component of the world.

The educational function of the spectacle emphasised by the cultural scholars is not imparted to all the characters in Raimi’s film. Phantasmagoria as presented in the Emerald City is not addressed to a homogeneous audience, which can be divided into two groups: on

13 Majewski, Dialektyczne feerie, p. 27.
the one hand Oscar’s allies, aware of the hidden mechanics, and on the other the Wicked Witches and almost all inhabitants of the royal city, unaware of the machinery. From the perspective of the fictitious intrigue, the witches are the most important recipients of the show which, by means of the technical capabilities of the optical devices involved, confronts them with their greatest fear, that of a power stronger than the one which they possess. And yet even the spectators who understand the principle of illusion allow themselves to be seduced by the terrifying ‘ghost’ of Oz, proving his magical power.

And so, how does Oscar plan and conduct his phantasmagoria show? The deception of the spectator’s senses and attention – so important in the case of every good illusionist show – provides the basis for the project. Before the actual spectacle begins, Oz stages his false escape: he fills the basket of the balloon with gold and valuables from the treasury and then releases the balloon. This action proves the protagonist’s critical self-awareness: in the first days of his stay at the castle he showed himself to be greedy, striving for wealth, as well as showing himself to be an unreliable and unfaithful person. Such a construction of character is typical of the fantasy genre, where characters are not clearly good or evil, as in the case of human types in fairy-tales.16 Oscar arrived in the Land of Oz in a hot air balloon, and so the means of his escape from the battle field seems logical to the other characters. Yet the departure of the balloon – very quickly destroyed by the spells of the Wicked Witches – is only a prelude to the real show.

When the audience in front of the castle seem to be sure of Oz’s escape, and Theodora and Evanora are preparing to kill Glinda, torches are suddenly lit by invisible hands around the square and a fire breaks out accompanied by a pillar of smoke. Upon the ‘screen’ of smoke appears a projection of Oz’s head, significantly enlarged. The protagonist screams with rage and his face is twisted in a grimace of fury. Music emphasizes the horror of the situation and the inhabitants of the Emerald City flee in fear of the phantasm. Fear can also be seen on the faces of the evil sisters, only Glinda gently smiles because she has apparently begun to understand the idea of the perfect illusion announced by Oz. Evanora’s reaction to the projection demonstrates her allegiance to a fantasy world where miracles and magic are part of an everyday reality. She treats the tricks of Oscar as an insult to her and her sister, as they are convinced of their superiority where magic is concerned. Oscar plays with their self-confidence by ‘disappearing’ for a moment after Theodora’s intervention, skilfully building tension in this battle of trickeries. He also compliments the Wicked Witches’ faith in magic power, and boasts of a new status: “Thanks to you, I’ve shed my mortal shell and taken my true ethereal form. I’m now more powerful than ever. I’m invincible. Do you still doubt me?”

The tricks used by Robertson and Philisthal resulted in the “dematerialisation of the so-called projection plane, making it impossible for the viewers to adequately situate images in the surrounding space”\textsuperscript{17}, so that the viewer’s immersion in the world of images became possible. Pouring water on the grate in a fireplace, they created a cloud of smoke or water vapour, using the projection from an additional magic lantern to evoke “the impression that the phantasm had a tangible body”\textsuperscript{18}. In addition, the subject of the phantasmagoria shows referred to necromancy, calling up the ghosts of the dead, which intensified the weird and baleful atmosphere. Combined with a skilful application of technology the illusion became perfect. Similar tricks help Oz achieve the effect of a semi-transparent phantasm of some volume which seems almost tangible when projected on to the cloud of smoke.

The people of Oz and the evil sisters behave like the audience, who are unaware of the machinery producing the illusion. Majewski defines “unenlightened spectators” as “those who believe in the ontological reality of phantasm, in their existence independent of the projection activity of the optical apparatus and the viewer”.\textsuperscript{19} A similar problem is described by Edgar Morin in reference to cinema. He argues that the film projection replaced the faith in phantasms typical of magical thinking: “Those who do not know the secret believe that they deal with magic tricks. Because it is true that a shadow, each shadow, immediately refers to fantasy and surrealism”.\textsuperscript{20} For the inhabitants of the Land of Oz the inmaterial appearance of a person testifies to tremendous magical powers. They share the type of magical thinking which for Morin identifies an image, a double, with a thing, and which is based on sympathetic magic, on a belief that a thing is in a mysterious way present in its image.\textsuperscript{21} According to Morin this type of magic also includes illusionist art. At this point, however, he relies, in my opinion, on an over-simplified model of the adequacy of effects such as transformation, and the appearance and disappearance of things.\textsuperscript{22}

The phantasmagoria performed by Oscar is perceived as a phantasm (Morin’s double, the Doppelgänger produced by the process of multiplication) by the Wicked Witches and the people of Oz: “The double is actually the most basic image of a human being, it is even older than the human self-awareness, an image recognized in a reflection or a shadow, appearing in dreams and hallucinations”.\textsuperscript{23} The huge phantasm of Oscar’s face combines the objective

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{Tylicka and Leszczyński, Słownik literatury, p. 23.}
\bibitem{Tylicka and Leszczyński, Słownik literatury, p. 23.}
\bibitem{Tylicka and Leszczyński, Słownik literatury, p. 24.}
\bibitem{Morin, Kino i wyobraźnia, p. 74.}
\bibitem{Morin, Kino i wyobraźnia, pp. 39–40.}
\bibitem{Morin, Kino i wyobraźnia, p. 78. I do not agree with Morin’s opinion that illusionists were sustaining primordial magical thinking. I find more convincing the view described in the introduction – that illusionists represent the type of thinking typical of fantasy poetics: stemming from a scientific and rational world-view which is inspired by technological aspects of illusion and which testifies to the need for mythos.}
\bibitem{Morin, Kino i wyobraźnia, p. 42.}
\end{thebibliography}

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nature of photography with the subjective projection of desires, dreams and fears which separates itself from the spectator’s mind and imagination, and makes itself present in an independently existing image. But the phantasmagoric image has a completely different effect on spectators who share modern understandings of magical thinking stemming from the Enlightenment rationalization of all supernatural phenomena. They include both Oz’s allies, who are aware of the technical side of the illusion, and contemporary viewers of Raimi’s film.

In the sequence under discussion, shots of the square in front of the palace alternate with shots of technical backroom space where Oz and his friends operate. The protagonist sits inside the drum of a machine resembling a praxinoscope combined with a variable aperture lens, a sound system, and numerous mirrors. The hybrid device constructed by Oz is a laboratory of the research and achievements of Della Porta, Kircher, Renaud, Horner, Philisthal and Robertson. Oscar’s technical skills come from a romantic motivation not unlike Della Porta’s attempts to show and explain the impossible. The surprise effect aimed at the audience and based on the improbability of the images to be shown is planned down to the tiniest detail and calculated to the second. The backroom shots are not deprived of humour, either: the re-start of the projection is delayed because of a loose cable, and Oz, Master Tinker and Finley have a very good time operating the apparatus. The viewer of Oz the Great and Powerful learns about the functioning of the invention which was earlier described by Oscar when he was ordering the machine from Tinker. When he announces that they are going to build a machine which “allows you to project an image onto space”, Tinker and Finley are rather sceptical and the Master claims that that it is “impossible”. Oz answers: “Nothing is impossible if you put your mind to it”. Thus, once again the protagonist declares his belonging to an epoch characterised by the “episteme of modernity” as Majewski’s sees it, where the most miraculous and improbable illusion results from scientific research and the brilliance of the human mind.

As I have suggested, however, the scientific ethos of phantasmagoria and later magic spectacles was never clear and obvious. Magical thinking also changed. During the Enlightenment, it was already based on the anthropocentric imagination granting the greatest power to the human being. In this approach science was born out of medieval ‘magic’, while “what we tend to perceive – in retrospect – as magical and irrational was given a function that in modern times is fulfilled by science”. A certain contradiction between the rational world-view which denies the existence of any kind of miracle, and the faith in an evil

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magic understood as “the state of the desire of power”\textsuperscript{27}, can be found in the figure of Oscar. The protagonist agrees to fight the Wicked Witches in exchange for the royal throne and untold wealth. He is, after all, accustomed to control over minds of the female audience and to the submission of women who are enchanted by his abilities.

And although Oz’s phantasmagoria is prepared in front of the cinema audience and none of the elements of constructing the illusion is a secret to the protagonist’s friends either, the effect of astonishment—resulting from the beguilement of the spectators’ senses—becomes the most important aim of the spectacle.\textsuperscript{28} In his extremely interesting analysis of phantasmagoria as a phenomenon which significantly influenced aesthetic discourse at the turn of the 20\textsuperscript{th} Century, Gunning indicates another important context—the notion of the uncanny, deriving from Freud’s notion of the Unheimlich. According to the father of psychoanalysis the uncanny refers to non-abandoned primordial beliefs which are reactivated by means of optical illusion in the audience for the spectacle.\textsuperscript{29} The feeling of the uncanny relates to a dimension of phantasmagoria based on primitive faith in phantasms of the dead. In terms of the didactic framework of the shows, which reminds us of the scientific and rational explanation of the illusion, phantasmagoria reveals an extremely important tension between scientific knowledge and the spectator’s belief (or otherwise) in the ontological reality of phantasms.

According to Gunning, “Freud reveals how the uncanny effect of the Phantasmagoria derives from a dialectic—not only between what we sense and what we know—but between what we think we know and what we fear we might actually believe.”\textsuperscript{30} The perfection of illusion does not consist of presenting the spectator with a phantasm of something or somebody whose existence they believe in. However, the trick leads him to start believing in the reality of the projection. Seen in this way, phantasmagoria becomes a modern experience which grants the activity of the senses a status equal to that of cognition. Majewski aptly suggests that this extension of the role of human sensuality is also reflected in granting “figurative meaning to the notion of Phantasmagoria” used as a metaphor of a cognitive act which objectivizes and materializes individual phantoms hidden in the spectator’s subconsciousness and imagination.\textsuperscript{31}

As is clear from the research by Gunning, Castle, and Majewski, the screen of phantasmagoria used to be metaphorically understood also as a mirror placed in front of the audience for the spectacle. Erkki Huhtamo, one of the theorists and practitioners of the

\textsuperscript{27} Grzybkowska-Lewicka, ‘Trzy typy cudowności w literaturze fantasy’, p. 128.
\textsuperscript{29} Gunning, ‘Illusions’, p. 7.
\textsuperscript{31} Majewski, Dialektyczne feerie, p. 36.
archaeological approach, notices that understandings of the word ‘screen’ as a projection surface dates back to 1810 thanks to its popularization by phantasmagoria shows.\textsuperscript{32} Before this date images were projected on a semi-transparent material which Robertson defines as a “mirror”.\textsuperscript{33} It provides Majewski with the basis for a daring interpretation of a common phantasmagoria image of Medusa “as a metaphorical depiction of the imaging procedure”\textsuperscript{34}, reminiscent of the metamorphosis machine constructed by Athanasius Kircher.\textsuperscript{35} Thus, in relation to the Freudian category of the Unheimlich, phantasmagoria not only shows phantasmatic images to the viewers, it also visualises their fears by returning their own gaze as a mirror does. Hence the horror, the fascinating unreality and improbability, of the images. Moreover, some researchers are prone to accept that the mirror effect of phantasmagoria stems from collective hallucinations, presenting collective visions typical of the modern epoch. For Gunning, the charm of such shows derives from the fusion of realism and fantasy, and from the conflict between art and representation, so typical of modernism and postmodernism.\textsuperscript{36}

If the phantasmagoria screen has the features of a mirror which reflects the spectator’s gaze, and the deeply hidden fears and desires that lie within, it also works in the manner of the wicked sprite’s mirror in Hans Christian Andersen’s ‘The Snow Queen’. It mercilessly exposes the corruption and egoism of Evanora who has long been evil; her appearance may be beautiful and elegant, but she is perfectly deceptive. For many years, the inhabitants of the royal city have not realized that they are ruled by someone who is quite different than they think. Evanora always presents Glinda as the wicked one, but she turns out to be a perfect cheat herself; and perhaps she is so afraid of Oscar’s phantasm because she sees the reflection of her character in it. Theodora, on the other hand, sees the reflection of her bitterness and hatred while looking at the phantasmagoric mirror, and no longer sees her good features. When Oz tells her “I know your wickedness is not your doing” and calls on her to transform again, her response is a powerful “Never!”, and she flies away on her broom. Oscar lowers his head in sadness. He is aware that the woman’s metamorphosis relates to his betrayal. And despite his good will to rectify it, his image is the wicked sprite’s mirror for

\textsuperscript{33} Majewski, ‘Fantasmagoria’, p. 34. Earlier, as Huhtamo explains, the word ‘screen’ meant a kind of curtain, a folding screen and it is significant especially in the context of the scene quoted from Baum’s novel: when the characters from the book gather in the throne room asking Oz to fulfill their wishes: he is hidden behind a folding screen.
\textsuperscript{34} Majewski, ‘Fantasmagoria’, p. 33.
\textsuperscript{35} Majewski, ‘Fantasmagoria’, p. 33; Zielinski, Archeologia mediów, pp. 183–186. In the apparatus constructed by Kircher, a special arrangement of images and mirrors meant that spectators looking at the mirror did not see their own reflection, but an image located out of their sight.
\textsuperscript{36} See Gunning, ‘Illusions’.
Theodora, the one which confirms her determination to remain on the side of hatred and revenge.

At first, the inhabitants of Oz are also scared when they see the phantasm; only later, when they notice the witches’ uncertainty, do they begin to believe in its positive power. In other words, the phantasmagoric mirror reflects various images depending on the identity of the beholder. Oscar’s “greatest trick” in the Emerald City corresponds to the understanding of phantasmagoria as a mirror-like representation of the recipient’s internal states projected on to the images created by the magic lantern. Once again, everyone perceives phantasmagoric shadows in a different way. The Wizard from the novel also used his people’s fear by appearing to each character in a form which could evoke her/his terror. However, Oscar’s show is dominated by two possible models of phantasmagoric image perception, one present in the diegesis, the other at the interface between the world of Oz and the space of cinematic reception; in the case of the film—which in addition to being so rich in special effects and CGI is available to watch in 3D—a true appreciation of its references to phantasmagoria spectacles is perhaps only possible in the cinema itself.

The mechanism which “operates directly on [...] perception”37 used by Evanora, Theodora and the inhabitants of Oz is slightly different from the one affecting the viewers of Raimi’s film. Why does Oscar—who belongs to the real world and does not possess any supernatural power (and probably even does not believe in it)—win over the Wicked Witches of the Land of Oz? From the rational viewpoint of the world presented in the film, the fight in which he engages is extremely dangerous because of the true magic power of the witches, a power which is not a mere illusion but which can change reality. And yet it is Oz who turns out to be “the great and powerful”. I infer that the uncanny dimension of the phantasmagoria effect is of decisive importance to the outcome of the battle between the illusionist and the witches. The spectacle in front of the palace in the Emerald City creates in the minds of both witches the fear that Oz might be the wizard mentioned in the prophecy.

The reversal of the situation described by Gunning occurs here. In the Land of Oz, faith in magic and sorcery is the equivalent of the rational world-view in the real world. During the action, however, Theodora and Evanora cease to believe that Oscar who came from an unknown Kansas is the expected wizard; he proves to be an arrogant poser, seducer, a man thirsty for power and wealth. However, the tricks he presents to the witches raise fearful doubts over their supremacy and turn out to be more powerful than Theodora’s and Evanora’s fantasy spells. The women lose their footing, their vision of a world ruled by magic falls apart. Thus Oscar accomplishes his mission of freeing the Land from the rule of evil, and he manages to do it following the principles of the fantasy genre. Unlike fairy-tale heroes who win through magic, the heroes of fantasy stories are not supposed to make use of

supernatural powers in order to achieve their goal. After all, Oscar’s praxino-phantasmagoria is only the illusion created by a prestidigitator.

However, at the beginning of the 21st Century, a spectator familiar with new technologies of illusion, virtual reality and immersive entertainment perceives the spectacle in the Emerald City in a different way. In the 3D version of the film, which enables full immersion into Oz’s world, the sequence under analysis simply dazzles, completing the effect of phantasmagoria from the late 18th Century – when more and more importance was assigned to the role of darkness in the creation of spectacle as the new form of phantasmagoria replaced the illuminated nature of the traditional stage and auditorium. These new conditions for the projection of moving images, of course, later became fundamental for the medium of cinema. The spectacle in the Emerald City does not take place in complete darkness, but in the twilight of dusk. Only the cinema hall allows spectators of Raimi’s film to experience the quasi-material nature of phantasmagoric image projected on the clouds of smoke and reproduced by 3D technology. The true audience for Oz’s “greatest trick” is then the cinema audience for whom the elaborate world of the Land of Oz was created.

At this point it is worth remembering that the most famous magician in the history of the cinema, Georges Méliès, also noticed and used the ambiguous role of film technology. The director whom Edgar Morin described as “[a] magician who put the cinematograph into a hat and took out Cinema” was aware that by means of the theatrical and illusionist machinery he could create images which – most of all thanks to constant metamorphoses – spectators would perceive as a magical or oneiric show. The spectator’s encounter with Oz the Great and Powerful is a re-enactment of the phenomenon which was defined as a perfect illusion by phantasmagoria experts. We are aware that the three-dimensional phantasms are only immaterial images present in the cinema space thanks to a projector; we understand perfectly well the operation of the machinery built by Oz; we observe his plans and projects and the stages of the process by which illusion is produced. We are also aware that there are projectors behind us in the cinema, even if we cannot see them. We are well aware that phantasms do not exist. And yet we get involved in the film world of Kansas and the Land of Oz, for a moment doubting the certainty of our rationalised view of reality, and, above all, we sensually experience the spectral, ethereal phenomenon which is a three-dimensional image within the space of projection. Oscar’s face on the pillar of smoke takes shape, is almost tangible.

40 Morin, Kino i wyobraźnia, p. 81.
I refer once more to Morin’s notion that whenever a shadow appears, it makes us assume the existence of a surreal and fantastical world. Sam Raimi, for his part, reminds us that in the second century of cinema, the theorist’s intuition is still valid. It is confirmed by the sensations evoked by films of the new epoch in which it is possible to present virtually anything. Imagination, transformation and metamorphosis – considered by Morin to be basic elements of a cinematographic spectacle, demonstrating its magical dimension – have been effectively perfected using new technological tools. And film-makers do not hide from the audience the mechanisms of production of the most perfect tricks and illusions: each new film where new CGI technological inventions are used is thoroughly described and commented on by experts. Only in the cinema itself is the machine hidden, and understanding of the images produced is left to the discretion of the spectator. The most intense experience of this issue is in the case of the fantasy genre, with its various types of miracles – on the one hand those connected with a primordial religious world-view, and on the other those belonging to the sphere of technological magic and which rely on a rational approach which places the human being at the centre of the universe.

With the figure of Oscar/Oz Sam Raimi presents a set of questions and phantoms referring to the still enchanting nature of the cinematographic spectacle. Victor Fleming in The Wizard of Oz achieved a similar effect, emphasising the relation between cinema, the fairy-tale, and nostalgia for childhood wishes and beliefs. In an essay on Fleming’s film Katherine A. Fowkes reflects upon the relation between the cinema machinery and fantasy: How can we reconcile our desire for illusion and for enjoying a fantasy film with the knowledge that the wizard himself is a fraud? If the Wizard of Oz is a failed magician, his use of technology to create awe through visual illusion nevertheless recalls the connection between the technology of cinema and fantasy in general. The need to experience a spectacle which not only provides the satisfaction stemming from a powerful illusory craft but also touches our deepest and most primitive deposits of fear – evoking a magical attitude towards media images – is clearly still powerful. And if fantasy is supposed to fulfil the function of a cognitive strategy, as Oziewicz puts it, we need wizards just like Oz the Great and Powerful to inspire us to reconsider ways of learning about the world of images by re-evoking the need for mythos in a modern epoch of scientifically ordered reality. And who to remind us about it better than an illusionist?

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41 Morin, Kino i wyobraźnia, pp. 70–79.
The ‘Ghost of an Idea’:
Technology, Adaptation, and the Motion-Captured Body
in Robert Zemeckis’s *A Christmas Carol*

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The opening of Robert Zemeckis’s *A Christmas Carol* (USA, 2009) incorporates the complex interactions between the supernatural, the filmic body, adaptation and technology which will be explored in this article. The scene opens on a lighted candle and a window with a view onto a winter street in what appears to be Victorian London. The camera tilts downwards to find a leather-bound book with ‘*A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens’ inscribed in gold lettering. As the camera zooms in, the pages suddenly flick open and stop on the book’s famous opening line, “Marley was dead: to begin with.” A further zoom focuses on the word “dead”, and the page turns again to a drawing of the corpse: a close-up details the pallid face and coins resting over the eyes. As the camera tracks backwards, the image of the dead man’s head begins to transform, and the black lines of the ink illustration metamorphose into a photorealistic digital image. The first cut in the sequence introduces the central character – Scrooge – in a low-angled shot, staring at the body. He turns his head so that part of his face is illuminated against the shadows cast by his hat. This lighting reveals the verisimilitude of the animation: Scrooge’s skin is rendered with a photographic quality which highlights the wrinkles and pores of his skin. The breath emanating from his lips suggests the coldness of his surroundings, as his first words confirm Marley’s condition: “Yes. Quite dead.”
The action quickly establishes the supernatural themes of the narrative as well as activating extra-diegetic references to Dickens’s tale. The film is clearly another adaptation of the famous Christmas story, with Dickens explicitly identified as the author on the book’s cover, which is reminiscent of the 1843 first edition. This similarity is reflective of how Dickens’s work is “an important point of convergence within our popular culture”, where the majority of audiences experience the story primarily through film and television adaptations.¹ The audience’s likely familiarity with the tale enables Zemeckis to remain focussed on the minute detail of the shots: the scene emphasises the spectacular nature of the digital animation, with the close-up of Marley’s and then Scrooge’s face drawing attention to the veracity of detail afforded to these characters.

The film is, then, already haunted on two levels. First, by the narrative, which is concerned with the depiction of ghosts: it is significant that Marley’s lifeless face is privileged here as this body be re-animated in spectral form later. Second, the film is haunted by its own technological mediation and status as an adaptation. The opening shots dramatize a movement from the written word to the still illustration, and then to the moving image, and these transitions suggest a lineage in storytelling media where cinema is presented as the teleological conclusion of its predecessors. Yet these effects embody a strange, ghostly ontology: the film uses motion-capture technology, whereby the movement and appearance of digital characters are based upon the recording of live performances. The use of the technology in *A Christmas Carol* for the purposes of animation signals an unusual hybridity where the film appeals to animation’s ability to caricature the human form but where these bodies also retain an indexical link to their real-world counterparts – the actors – whilst the film’s aesthetic appeals to the verisimilitude of photographic realism.

This article reflects upon how representations of the supernatural – the literal ghosts of the story – function to draw attention to the haunted and uncanny nature of the digital body on screen. The ghost becomes an apt metaphor for conceptualising the ontology of new film technologies like motion-capture. In utilising the ghost as emblematic of the strangeness of this digital visual effect, the article illuminates the complexity inherent in equating motion-capture with the spectral, but the suitability of drawing this analogy within Zemeckis’s film specifically. The first part of my article outlines audience responses to the film which demonstrate how Zemeckis’s re-telling of Dickens’s story is not only figuratively haunted, but a text which needs to be historically contextualised as haunting. Zemeckis’s film was unfavourably received by viewers, with critics repeatedly commenting on the digital characters’ “dead eyes” and the “soulless” impression this creates.² These reactions confirm

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that it is not the portrayal of ghosts which is eerie about the film but rather it is, ironically, the representation of the human, living body which is haunting.

I go on to demonstrate the importance of these reactions for screen history and the development of visual effects. Integral to this is highlighting the suitability of Zemeckis’s choice of *A Christmas Carol* for adaptation. Exploration of the novel’s previous adaptations reveals a longer history of representing the supernatural elements in Dickens’s work using new technologies. These optical tricks and illusions, which include early cinema, evoke a similar double haunting present in Zemeckis’s film: the ethereal appears material, and the living human body becomes unstable and ghostly. I conclude by reinforcing the connection between Zemeckis’s *A Christmas Carol* and the story’s earlier incarnations by returning to motion-capture and its analysis within film theory. Here motion-capture itself is characterised as ghostly, illuminating a wider context which perceives human interactions with digital technology in increasingly supernatural terms. Ultimately, *A Christmas Carol* presents a timely and pertinent challenge for its viewer: the uncanniness of motion-capture suggests that it is not the portrayal or even the idea of ghosts which is disturbing; rather, it is the conceptualisation of the filmic human body which haunts.

**The Uncanny Reception of Zemeckis’s *A Christmas Carol***

Motion-capture technology combines the live performance of actors with the creation of digital characters. During the motion-capture process, actors wear skin-tight suits fitted with a series of reflective dots. These dots reflect infrared light back into the cameras surrounding the performance area, called the Volume, where the actors move and interact. The collected data is then used to shape an animated body, creating a digital avatar which has the capacity to retain a physical resemblance to the real-world performer. Zemeckis used the technology in his earlier films *The Polar Express* (2004) and *Beowulf* (2007), and *A Christmas Carol* uses the technique for all its major characters. The cast includes Jim Carrey playing Scrooge and the three Christmas spirits. The film was released by Disney in London in November 2009 to coincide with the festive season. The end result, however, attracted extensive criticism from reviewers and audiences. James Plath calls the film “creepy”, a sentiment echoed by Ken Hanke who describes the characters as “rubbery-faced”. Chris Barsanti calls the characters “goony-faced animatronic creatures” and Sonny Bunch argues that Zemeckis’s film answers

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3 During his experiments with the technology, Zemeckis developed a system to record facial movements as well, naming this ‘performance capture’. This technique is used for *A Christmas Carol* although I refer to the technology as ‘motion-capture’ here to maintain continuity with the terminology used in reviews and scholarship on the topic.

4 The film was produced by ImageMovers Digital, a company jointly created by Zemeckis’s ImageMovers and Disney to focus on motion-capture. *Only A Christmas Carol and Mars Needs Moms* (Wells, USA, 2011) were produced under the company name before Disney removed its support following commercial losses.

“the one question still remaining about the Dickens classic: What would the movie look like if it were cast with figures from Madame Tussauds?”

In this way *A Christmas Carol* continues the trend in negative critical reactions garnered by Zemeckis’s previous forays into motion-capture technology. For example, Paul Clinton writes that *The Polar Express* is so “creepy” that the film “should be subtitled ‘The Night of the Living Dead’” and Manohla Dargis concludes that the characters of *Beowulf* lack “the spark of true life […] You see the cladding but not the soul.” The key complaint against all of Zemeckis’s motion-captured works concerns the portrayal of the digital human characters. These bodies may have been rendered using the vitality of live-action actors, but the attempt to transfer this real-life performance into a photorealistic digital animation is found wanting. The contradictory appearance of the motion-captured character as simultaneously unrealistic and altogether too real inspires the reactions outlined here: the digital body is mechanical-looking, the creepy movement of the lifeless, and evocative of automata.

It is for these reasons that Zemeckis’s motion-captured films have been associated with the theory of the ‘Uncanny Valley’, a term coined by Masahiro Mori in 1970 to theorise the interaction between people and artificial human bodies. Mori proposes that the more such synthetic bodies appear lifelike – even real – the more repulsive the figure seems. This is particularly applicable where a high degree of realism is evident but where the illusion is not complete: the small imperfections, such as stiffness of movement or lifeless eyes, are readily apparent. Mori’s ‘Uncanny Valley’ piece was written within the context of Japanese robotics but the term was soon adopted at the beginning of the 21st Century to describe digital human bodies too, such as those in Hironobu Sagakuchi’s and Motonori Sakakibara’s *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within* (USA/Japan, 2001), the first feature-length production to use this type of 3D photorealistic animation. Critics of *A Christmas Carol* also utilise the term, noting that the film “slides into the uncanny valley, introducing us to supposedly-realistic ‘humans’ that are both too human and not human enough”.

With its origins in robotics, the application of the ‘Uncanny Valley’ within the critical reception of the digital body is apt, particularly for motion-capture, whose technological processes are based on movement. However, the ‘Uncanny Valley’ alone is not enough here: as I have argued elsewhere, the concept should be contextualised within a much longer

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10 Mori makes the point that the effects of the Uncanny Valley are exacerbated by movement.
tradition of associating the filmic body with tropes of the uncanny. For A Christmas Carol, such historicising helps to elucidate the significance of the supernatural specifically; many of the film’s spectators express the uncanniness of watching the motion-captured body in terms of the uneasy blurring between the living and the dead. The digital humans in A Christmas Carol are not just repulsive as incomplete illusions but, rather, convey the impression of the living as appearing deceased, and the dead becoming re-animated. The body becomes a ghost.

The critical responses to A Christmas Carol can be categorised into three groups: comments which focus on the digital characters’ eyes; those which draw upon metaphors of the dead or undead body; and statements which reflect upon the technology’s uncanniness in relation to film aesthetics more broadly. First, the dead appearance of the human characters’ eyes is a constant theme in viewer reactions: the motion-captured body has a “creepy, dead-eyed effect”, and this perception recurs elsewhere, in comments on “creepy, dead-eyed and inexpressive performances” where “especially their eyes [...] look dead and soulless”. The characters’ “animated eyes never seem to focus”, it is claimed, evoking the impression that these bodies are “lacking soul”, even to the extent that A Christmas Carol is inhabited by “ghoulishly dead-eyed human characters”.

Significantly, these complaints refer to the appearance of digital bodies who are diegetically alive; although the film explicitly explores representations of spirits and the undead, it is the portrayal of the living human characters which is the source of these reactions to the uncanny. The film’s opening thus conveys an unintentional irony: the first body seen is that of a corpse, and Marley’s deceased state is emphasised through the coins placed over his eyes and the words of Scrooge. The cut to (the living) Scrooge should therefore appear all the more spectacular, where viewers can marvel at the vitality and realism of this digitally created body, particularly the face and eyes. The fact the opposite occurs – that this alive character is seen as “dead-eyed” – signals how the impression of the uncanny is transported onto the living body as a direct result of its digital rendering.

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12 This research is based on the collection and analysis of audience and critical responses gathered for my PhD thesis. Over 500 of these concern Zemeckis’s motion-capture works although in this article I focus on the reactions to A Christmas Carol in particular.
I use ‘uncanny’ quite specifically here: the term evokes the theoretical dimensions postulated by Freud in his seminal essay ‘The Uncanny’ (1919), in which he sought to explain the uncanny as an experience of unease in both aesthetic (and, specifically, literary) and real-life contexts. Freud explores a range of examples of uncanny experiences – including the Gothic workings of E.T. A. Hoffmann’s The Sandman (1816), accounts by his patients, and his own strange experiences – and postulates several reasons behind this type of unease within a psychoanalytical framework. Freud concludes that the uncanny is the return of a former repressed state or memory related to childhood fears and beliefs, and specifically related to the fear of “being robbed of one’s eyes” which “is quite often a substitute for the fear of castration”.\(^{15}\) Freud’s characterisation of the uncanny is reliant upon the etymology of the adjective unheimlich where the combination of ‘homely’ with ‘unhomely’ reveals his key definition of the uncanny experience: “Heimlich thus becomes increasingly ambivalent, until it finally merges with its antonym unheimlich. The uncanny (das Unheimliche, ‘the unhomely’) is in some way a species of the familiar (das Heimliche, ‘the homely’).”\(^{16}\)

The uncanny is, then, “a peculiar commingling of the familiar and unfamiliar”\(^{17}\) which “deals in the constant troubling of the quotidian”.\(^{18}\) The uncanny resides in the uncertainty of the in-between, in the slippage of boundaries and the removal of definitional borders. The negative reactions to A Christmas Carol which focus upon the lifeless appearance of the eyes are symptomatic of this experience. Zemeckis’s framing of Scrooge’s introduction seeks to convey the spectacular realism of the motion-captured body by establishing distinct classifications: the moving image is distinct from the still image; the line-drawing is different from 3D digital animation; and the (living) motion-captured body is juxtaposed with a corpse in order to emphasise the vigour of the moving avatar. The uncanny experience of the film, for viewers, occurs because these categories appear to blur or collapse: the photorealistic digital animation is neither a straightforward cartoon nor a live-action film, and it is the living characters who appear lifeless as a result. The “dead eyes” are indicative of this uncanny experience, as Simon Reynolds notes: “Presented in this form, the eyes – supposedly the windows to the soul – just don’t have it”.\(^{19}\)

The second group of audience reactions emphasises how the “soulless” rendering of the digital humans’ eyes gives rise to feelings of the uncanny via an evocation of the supernatural, specifically the undead. The digital characters move “with a weightlessness” and are described as “zombie-like”, “ghoulish”, “corpse-like”, and “dead”.\(^{20}\) In these instances,
the human characters are akin to a ghost: they maintain a link to the living – reviewers acknowledge the motion-capture technology and the actors’ function in this process – but the body on-screen is an empty vessel, an unnerving echo of the real, embodied performance of the actor. This displeasure is expressed as both the failure of technology to preserve the emoting performance of the original actor – “motion-capture remains an impediment to capturing emotion”21 – and the symptom of an overabundance of technology, where the digital mediation masks the real body underneath: the “real actors [are] slathered with digital effects”.22 These contradictory comments speak to the uncanniness of the human characters, which can be understood in terms of ghosts. The ghost is an uncanny figure: it encompasses the ultimate slippage in time, space, movement and stillness, the living and the dead. As María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren suggest: “[The] ghostly can be said to refer to that which is present yet insubstantial (the spirit rather than the body), secondary rather than primary (a faint copy, a trace, a ghost writer), and potentially unreal or deceptive.”23

The oxymoronic nature of the ghost’s ontology is dramatized within the film itself. Marley’s spirit does not suddenly appear to Scrooge in its complete, repulsive form; rather the ghost initially announces its presence through the transformation of Scrooge’s environment in the world of the ‘living’. Marley first materialises out of Scrooge’s door-knocker, initially unmoving, framed within a close-up to echo his introduction as a corpse during the film’s opening images. As Scrooge reaches towards the strange, glowing, spectral head, Marley suddenly opens his eyes and his visage becomes monstrous, with his flesh revealing the decaying bone underneath, and his mouth spits teeth. The apparition disappears and Scrooge dismisses its significance. Soon afterwards, Scrooge’s world is disrupted again by spectral forces as he begins to suspect the familiar surroundings of his bedchamber. This scene, which privileges high-angle shots in order to emphasise Scrooge’s vulnerability, produces a moment of terror when the servant bells inexplicably begin to ring.

Marley’s manipulation of Scrooge’s lived experience encapsulates what is haunting about a ghost’s existence and why this is experienced as uncanny. Marley collapses the distinction between the still and the animate, the solid and the malleable object, silence and noise, and, ultimately, the spaces of the living and the existence of the dead. The ghost challenges logical conceptions of time and space as it is both a presence and an absence, as reflected in Marley’s embodied but ethereal appearance. Like the reviewers’ observations

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concerning the use of motion-capture, the ghost’s existence is both over-abundant and excessive, but also a symbol of lack and emptiness. The ghost is uncanny, but the uncanny is also ghostly as it, too, “unsettles time and space, order and sense”.

It is in this way that ghosts and the supernatural become fruitful metaphors for audiences articulating their experience of *A Christmas Carol*, and why the uncanny is an apt theoretical concept through which to analyse this trend. The film’s depiction of the uncanniness of ghosts within the diegesis becomes an allegory for the experience of viewing the digital human body on screen. To experience the uncanny is to experience a haunting; the “anguish of the mind haunted by a familiar and unknown guest.”

Ironically, Scrooge’s interaction with Marley becomes a metaphor for viewers watching the film because, as Peter Howell suggests, Zemeckis’s motion-captured characters become “another Yule ghoul: the Ghost of Christmas Without Soul.”

This effect upon viewers is clearly unintentional and indicates a failure on the part of the film: the motion-capture conveys less the feeling of Christmas cheer and more the experience of humans “embalmed by technology” and “as insubstantial as the snowflakes.”

Indeed, in what I have defined as the third category of critical responses, many writers reflect upon the reasoning for using motion-capture at all. Kimberly Gadette notes that Zemeckis should have learned from the negative reactions to his previous motion-captured films: in respect to this technology, “enough is enough”. Similarly, James Rocchi notes that there is no “compelling reason to make” the film using motion-capture, a sentiment echoed by Tom Long: “Yes, it could be made this way [...] but why bother?”

This question implies that Zemeckis’s film is a mistake, insignificant in the wider context of contemporary film-making practices.

This is a view against which I argue for two reasons. First, these reactions of the uncanny and their evocation of the supernatural constitute an important record of how motion-capture is conceptualised by viewers and suggest some of the broader implications for thinking about the reception of new technologies. This also has an impact on how such technology is theorised within film scholarship, as I will later explore. Second, by adapting Dickens’s work Zemeckis inevitably activates the “paratextual halo” surrounding *A Christmas Carol* and its previous re-tellings. This history reveals remarkable precedents in portrayals...

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27 Morgenstern, ‘*A Christmas Carol*’.
of the body as uncanny and ghostly. Drawing an analogy between the past and Zemeckis’s contemporary film re-frames the above reactions within a longer narrative exploring the boundaries between the supernatural and technology. Two specific previous adaptations of *A Christmas Carol*, one from the theatre and the other from early cinema, illuminate this history.

**Ghosts of Christmas Past**

In reflecting upon his adaptation of Dickens’s classic tale, Zemeckis provides an answer to the question: why make a motion-captured version of the story? Zemeckis writes that the technology allows him to depict events the way “*Dickens saw it [...] which never could be done before because we never had the technology. So now, we finally get a chance.*”[^31] Zemeckis’s claim is somewhat disingenuous: *A Christmas Carol* has been adapted within various media on numerous occasions and some are significant for innovatively using technology to convey the supernatural events of the story. The two I will explore here are the stage adaptation using ‘Pepper’s Ghost’, and the first known film adaptation, *Scrooge; or, Marley’s Ghost* (Booth, UK, 1901). To appreciate the aesthetics of both these ventures, it is important to note that the first visual adaptation of Dickens’s work was through illustrations: the first edition of *A Christmas Carol in Prose Being a Ghost Story of Christmas* was released with engravings by artist John Leech, whose work embodies a “*highly stylized realism*” which pays close attention to the creation of Scrooge and his world.[^32]

Significantly, it is with such ‘realism’ that Leech depicts the supernatural presence of the spirits: all four are represented in some way by the illustrator, including Marley, whose face is given colour but whose body is detailed with a blue-grey which echoes the heavy shadows prominent elsewhere in the frame, thereby affording him an ethereal presence. Leech’s work keeps the living and the spectral bodies in Dickens’s story as distinct and separate entities, differentiating these through the use of colour, composition and line work. (The Ghost of Christmas Past is represented as a bright light which Scrooge covers with a candle extinguisher, as described in the story. The complexity of Dickens’s description of this spirit explains why Leech did not depict it directly.)

The staging of *A Christmas Carol* using Pepper’s Ghost maintains this appeal to realism but begins to the blur the boundaries between the living body and the ghost. *A Christmas Carol* was adapted immediately for the stage following its publication; eight theatrical versions had appeared by the middle of February 1844.[^33] One later depiction coincided with the development of Pepper’s Ghost. The name refers to a stage illusion which projected translucent spectres onto the main performance area with other actors’ (living) characters.

[^33]: Guida, pp. 39–41.
The effect was achieved by illuminating an actor beneath the stage with a bright light and reflecting this image off a large, angled mirror, unseen by the audience in the auditorium. Henry Dircks presented the idea in 1862 but the technique was not adopted for theatres until Professor John Henry Pepper of London’s Royal Polytechnic Institute saw the technology and suggested improvements. The effect was debuted at the Polytechnic and was a major success; Pepper’s Ghost, as it came to be known, enjoyed sustained popularity for several years.  

Pepper’s Ghost embodies the uncanny slippage between the body and the spectral, as enabled by technology. The illusion is part of a lineage of optical tricks, including the magic lantern and the phantasmagoria, which showed how bodies could be “risen from the grave and recreated ‘live’ on stage”. Pepper’s Ghost, however, is “one of the pivotal points of the nineteenth-century” because now the “body of the actor shared its space with various manifestations of modern technology”. Pepper’s Ghost demonstrated how the materiality of the body – the actor beneath the stage – could be transformed into an ethereal presence: the representation of the dead is embodied by the performance of the living and mediated by technology. Yet this mediation is itself a spectre, haunting the stage. The uncanniness of this experience is emphasised by the promotion of Pepper’s Ghost which, far from denying its technological ontology, explicitly advertised itself as a special effect. As Adelphi Theatre manager Benjamin Webster describes in 1863, Pepper’s Ghost is “the Extraordinary Machinery and the appliances requisite for the marvelous new Spectral effects”.

The haunting effect of Pepper’s Ghost is exacerbated by the subjects chosen for its ghostly demonstrations: the work of Dickens. Pepper’s Ghost successfully staged an adaptation of The Haunted Man (1848), depicting protagonist Redlaw and his ghostly double. This story – itself haunted by the huge success of A Christmas Carol – was soon accompanied by an adaptation of the Carol entitled Scrooge and Marley’s Ghost. A Christmas Carol continued to be adapted for the stage using Pepper’s Ghost, and advertisements stress how the spectres are a technological phenomenon: a poster from 1877 presents the story using the “Original Professor Pepper’s Optical Illusion” on the new “Ætherscope”. Like Zemeckis’s film, these versions appeal to the audience’s familiarity with Dickens’s text, a knowledge which is uncannily rendered ‘unhomely’ by the new technological mediation of the body and ghosts. Deborah Vlock notes that the connection between the novel and its adaptation was

37 Benjamin Webster in Carlson, p. 40.
38 Carlson, p. 29.
particularly strong in the 19th Century, when “Victorian readings were mediated by the culture of theatre”, a mutually reinforcing relationship she describes as a haunting.40

The haunting experience of the Pepper’s Ghost adaptations of A Christmas Carol is enhanced when one considers the context within which the story was created. The 19th Century witnessed a popular and scientific debate on the connections between the existence of ghosts, the living body, and technological advancements within various forums: Pepper’s Ghost is an example of this. Others include the Spiritualist movement and the use of spirit photography; emerging in the 1860s, spirit photography uncannily combined “the recognisability of photographic likenesses” with the “insubstantiality of ghosts”.41 Alternative discussions were interested in the workings of the mind which, if not motivated by confirming the existence of an afterlife, also characterised the body in ghostly terms.

Telepathy is one such instance and a publication of 1884 displaced the supernatural as an illusion of the mind where “ghosts, haunted houses and apparitions were all now to be considered facets of telepathy [...] displacing the cultural resonance of the ghost as a surviving spirit of the dead.”42 Dickens was well read in theories where “apparitions and spectral illusions were widely discussed [...] in relation to the involuntary functions of the mind.”43 Helen Groth notes that the use of Pepper’s Ghost in the adaptation of the author’s work is complementary to Dickens’s belief in the “civilising power of memory” as the illusion promotes “rational responses to seemingly inexplicable supernatural phenomena”.44 Louise Henson argues that Dickens’s knowledge of such research offers a radical re-interpretation of A Christmas Carol: the story is less about the appearance of the supernatural and more to do with the idea that the ghosts are an illusion of Scrooge’s mind.45 The context within which A Christmas Carol was adapted for the stage thus reveals how representations of the ethereal were refracted into conceptions of the living body as ghostly.

It is particularly apt, then, that the story was also adapted for another form of optical illusion rising to prominence in the 1890s, namely, animated photography. Frederick Talbot reflects upon the development of this film technology and notes how, during its inception, “to many it appeared uncanny”.46 The term is pertinent as the filmic body is uncanny: a photographed impression of reality which is preserved at a temporal and spatial remove from

44 Helen Groth, ‘Reading Victorian Illusions: Dickens’s ‘Haunted Man’ and Dr. Pepper’s ‘Ghost’, Victorian Studies vol. 50 no. 1, Autumn 2007, pp. 43–44.
45 Henson, ‘Investigations and Fictions’, p. 47.
reality but appears to 'live' again through the projected illusion of movement. Early cinema thus contributes to the previous conceptualisations of the body as ghostly debated earlier in the century, but this spectral capacity is specifically located within the ontological features and technology of film itself. This uncanniness was noted by early cinema viewers; reviewing the Lumière Cinématographe in 1896, Maxim Gorky describes the experience of watching the moving bodies on-screen as a “Kingdom of Shadows”: “It is not life but its shadow, it is not motion but its soundless spectre [...] All this moves, teems with life and, upon approaching the edge of the screen, vanishes somewhere beyond it.”\(^{47}\)

For Gorky, viewing the film image is an uncanny experience of liminality: the images are imbued with movement and the living, but the effect is spectral and eerie. The cinema frame itself fails to control and contain the ethereal qualities of its projected pictures: life simply “vanishes somewhere” into the ether, beyond the viewer’s sight. This slippage between the lifelike appearance of the filmic body and its spectral presence on-screen is indicated by the reactions of other early cinema viewers. Writing about the same 1896 film featuring future President McKinley, one critic wrote the film presents the presidential candidate “in the flesh”, whilst another describes the experience as supernatural: “No ghost can startle after this, no Frankenstein pursue us, for we have seen the instrument of the day become the playful specter of the night”.\(^{48}\) The ghost as a metaphor for the on-screen body incorporates the uncanny experience of watching such a spectacle, as these examples indicate, as well as illuminating the strange mechanisms behind the technology; film’s illusionism has the ability to convey and evoke – like the uncanny itself – “an uncertainty, at the heart of our ontology, our sense of time, place and history, which is unsettling, potentially terrifying and intriguing”.\(^{49}\)

The spectral qualities of the filmed body are emphasised in creative ways in an adaptation of *A Christmas Carol* for the screen in 1901. *Scrooge; Or, Marley’s Ghost* is the earliest known film adaptation of Dickens’s story, which was directed by Walter Booth and produced by R. W. Paul; only an incomplete version survives today, with 323 feet of the film preserved by the BFI National Archive. The film’s final sequences, including Scrooge’s redemption, are lost but surviving scenes convey the majority of the plot events. Like previous adaptations of *A Christmas Carol*, the film condenses the action of the novel considerably by privileging the ghost of Marley at the expense of the other spirits; it is only Marley who appears to Scrooge and shows him events of the past, present and future. In this way, the film’s narrative progression is reliant upon the interaction of two human bodies, one living


and one dead. Marley’s status as spectre is marked by the actor’s draping of a white cloth around his body.

It is by evoking the theme of the supernatural through this visual signification, however, that the film reveals the uncanny ghostliness of the living body on-screen. Marley’s interaction with the physical space of the *mise-en-scène* is presented through a series of trick shots, beginning with his appearance in the door-knocker. As with the Zemeckis version, this film presents the scene as a moment of horror, and in Booth’s film the actor’s decapitated head is seen to float before the Scrooge character. Later, in Scrooge’s bedchamber, Marley’s body is presented as translucent, superimposed on the action behind. Significantly, this effect, which is reminiscent of Pepper’s Ghost, is no longer contained within the representation of the spectral figure: Scrooge’s body is also depicted using this visual trick, as when Marley transports him to the past, present and future.

As Gorky comments a few years earlier, the filmic body here is imbued with supernatural qualities. Its photographic qualities make it realistic, but this veracity is rendered unstable. The body can be mutated, decapitated, vanish and reappear, or superimposed with other bodies and backgrounds. The trick effects work to emphasise the uncanniness of the on-screen body further by actively drawing attention to the technology of cinema and its mediation of events; indeed, the trick shots are only made possible because of the tension between the still images of film and the projected illusion of movement inherent in the cinematic experience. The trick film itself is an integral part of what Tom Gunning terms the “cinema of attractions”, whereby the earliest films formed “an exhibitionist cinema” which privileged the novelty of the medium over narrative progression.50 The notion that narrative remained a secondary concern is particularly relevant to this adaptation of *A Christmas Carol*. As Pepper’s Ghost had already shown, audiences’ familiarity with Dickens’s work already haunts any re-telling of the story, enabling spectators to focus on the experience of the special effect.

The film builds upon these associations by extending the trick effects across several scenes whilst the need for narrative exposition remains minimal: the film does not even require Dickens’s original title to activate the story’s cultural relevance. Instead the attraction lies in the depiction and transformation of the body on-screen using novel technology. This attraction is parodied within the film itself: during a creative re-interpretation of events, the undead Marley shows Scrooge images of his life by projecting the images upon curtains. These memories become a film within a film, with Scrooge now also a spectator who reacts emotionally to the moving bodies before him. The moment offers an intertextual reminder of the uncanniness of cinema, the bodies it projects and the spectator’s experience: the filmic figures Scrooge observes are lifelike, but this illusion sustains a disruptive temporality whereby the projected image is both present and past, moving and still. The instability of the

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filic body is exacerbated by the film’s use of trick effects. In this early adaptation of *A Christmas Carol*, Marley’s spirit may appear to Scrooge in events which repeat a familiar fictional haunting but, through the technological development of special effects, it is now the living Scrooge who, on film, is revealed to be a ghost.

Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol* is therefore a cultural artefact which is haunted by its numerous adaptations; re-tellings which correlate with the development of various visual effects technologies. The theatrical and filmic presentations of the story’s supernatural events draw attention to the ghostly qualities of the projected body, within a context which actively explored the associations between technology, the spectral, and the human body. Dickens’s fiction was already imbued with these relationships, as the author engaged in scientific debates concerning the supernatural and the mind, a connection which is emphasised in Pepper’s Ghost. It is within the filmic body that these concerns converge again: *Scrooge; Or, Marley’s Ghost* demonstrates how Dickens’s supernatural themes reveal that spectres are not only in the mind (like telepathy) or technological representations (like Pepper’s Ghost), but are infused within the recording and projecting of the living body.

It is within this history that Zemeckis’s work should be evaluated. The criticisms and uncanny experience outlined in my earlier remarks should not be interpreted as simply evidence that the film is an anomaly or technological failure. Rather, the film needs to be historically situated in order to understand how Zemeckis extends the tradition of adapting *A Christmas Carol* to explore these boundaries between technology and the supernatural. The uncanny experience of Zemeckis’s film is a reminder of how the ghost becomes an emblem for the spectral ontology of the filmic body, a trait which is analogous to previous adaptations of the story. What remains to be seen is what it is about motion-capture specifically that mobilises these associations, and how this should be contextualised within the 21st Century. In my final comments I argue that the uncanny rendering of the human characters as ghostly within Zemeckis’s film is inextricably linked to the spectral qualities of motion-capture, as indicated by the ways in which the technology is analysed within scholarly discourse.

**The Ghosting of Motion-Capture**

Booth’s 1901 film demonstrates how cinema’s trick effects emphasise and exaggerate the haunted nature of the filmic body, and so relating film technology to the supernatural is not, therefore, new: “With its ability to record and replay reality and its presentation of images that resemble the world but as intangible half-presences, cinema had been described as a haunted or ghostly medium from early on.”51 This idea, however, has been distinctly re-animated by the development of new visual effects and, in particular, by the increased use of digital technology. The scholarly evaluation of motion-capture is an important part of this

discourse into the spectral qualities of new technology and it is within this ongoing dialogue that Zemeckis’s version of *A Christmas Carol* should also be contextualised.

The uncanniness of motion-capture resides in the technology’s capacity to blur the boundaries between the live performance of real actors and the representation of embodiment created through animation. Motion-capture’s technique is often discussed in terms of the index: the idea that the digital avatar retains a trace or physical impression of the motion-captured body. This notion is evocative of previous debates in film theory which discuss the indexical properties of cinema’s photographic qualities, as famously discussed, albeit in differing contexts, by André Bazin and Roland Barthes. Barry King notes how the indexical claim for motion-capture is difficult to maintain because of its transformative properties and he likens the process instead to a form of digital ‘prosthesis’, an argument also made by Lisa Bode. Tanine Allison, on the other hand, defends motion-capture’s indexical qualities, arguing that the “translation” of the performer into a digital avatar signals digital animation’s ability to combine the index and icon in a hybrid fashion.

The bodies in Zemeckis’s *A Christmas Carol* highlight the disparity between these two theoretical positions. Scrooge’s introduction to the film emphasises Allison’s position that the motion-captured body is a fusion between markers which signal the physical presence and similarity to the original performer, and the malleability of the technology to transform this body through animation. As analysed earlier, Scrooge is first sighted through a zoom into a close-up which picks up on the features of his face. The film remains focused on Scrooge’s head throughout the succeeding sequence which dramatises the miser’s reluctance to pay the undertaker, and the reimbursement of this financial loss by means of the coins placed on Marley’s dead eyes. As Scrooge moves into the street, the camera tracks his movements, again privileging close-up and medium shots which frame the head and shoulders. After Scrooge signals his displeasure at the festive cheer being exhibited by his fellow citizens, the camera moves in front of Scrooge’s walking figure, so that he now faces the camera head-on, and the opening credits resume with the star name “Jim Carrey”.

These shots emphasise Scrooge as a character, but also Scrooge as an embodied performance. Similarly to the way in which the action efficiently conveys narrative by activating the audience’s collective familiarity with Dickens’s story, so too does the film appeal to the knowledge of Carrey’s star persona. Viewers acquainted with Carrey’s acting style will recognise some physical similarities between the performer and his digital avatar – traces of Carrey are evident within Scrooge’s face—as well as the actor’s distinct,

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54 Tanine Allison, ‘More than a Man in a Monkey Suit: Andy Serkis, Motion Capture, and Digital Realism’, *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, vol. 28 no. 4, July 2011, pp. 325–41.
exaggerated movements and voice. The superimposition of Carrey’s name on Scrooge’s image confirms the connection. Yet the film also struggles to maintain the visibility of these indexical and iconic links. Carrey was also motion-captured for the Christmas Spirits although Carrey’s presence within these digital creations is not overt. This is particularly apparent in the case of the Ghost of Christmas Past, which is notoriously difficult to visualise because of Dickens’s complex description of the spirit as both childlike and old, as though “viewed through some supernatural medium”.55 In Zemeckis’s film, Christmas Past is represented as a moving flame which disappears, reappears and moves with great speed during Scrooge’s first encounter. Although the flame has a face, the identity of the animation’s real-world actor is obscured. In this instance, Carrey’s indexical connection to Christmas Past is difficult to identify and King’s notion of a digital prosthesis which accounts for the transformative element of the technology is more applicable.

What is significant for Zemeckis’s film is how his adaptation of Dickens’s story intersects with scholars debating the ontology of motion-capture in this way, and how theorists appeal to notions of the supernatural in their analysis. Although Vivian Sobchack does not refer to motion-capture specifically, she comments how Final Fantasy creates a “deathlife” impression for the viewers, reversing Alan Cholodenko’s idea of the “lifedeath” nature of animation.56 Livia Monnet draws a similar conclusion, noting how “CGI humans literally ‘vampirize’ the motion-capture actors who modelled them”.57 Together Sobchack and Monnet illuminate how the uncanniness of motion-capture lies in its technique as a process and its affect as an animation. Monnet’s evocation of the vampire alludes to the indexical argument for motion-capture, emphasising the physicality of the connection between performing actor and the digital creation although this relationship is articulated as monstrous here: the animation’s effect is achieved by acquiring the life-force – movement – from the real-world actor.

Sobchack’s note demonstrates how this relationship leads to an uncanny experience for the viewer not necessarily because audiences acknowledge the indexical link – Sobchack does not specifically explore motion-capture – but because the digital body on-screen embodies both this lack of vitality together with an over-abundance of realism. The critical reactions outlined in my first section therefore extend the supernatural themes of A Christmas Carol’s narrative to reflect upon the film’s visual effects and the experience of viewing such technology in a manner comparable to these theoretical contemplations. Like Sobchack and Monnet, these responses emphasise the complexity in contemplating motion-

capture and its connection to the performing actor, with comments remarking on the film’s lack of “warmth”, the removal of the “human element”, and the loss of “the nuance of flesh-and-blood”.58

Scott Balcerzak synthesises the concerns surrounding motion-capture’s ontological properties with the experience of watching the technology when he conceptualises the process specifically in terms of haunting. Balcerzak argues that the technology does not enable a straightforward digitisation of the human body but rather removes the physical body altogether in favour of an actor’s electronic presence: the motion-captured body “can transcend the bodily and move completely into the realm of the spectral”.59 The indexical potential of motion-capture becomes a form of spirit or, in Balcerzak’s terms, an “aura”: “[The] effect onscreen helps to humanise the special effects performance by ‘ghosting’ the actor as a tangible presence. Mo-cap provides a major step in supplying corporeality to the artificially animated by affixing the aura of a body.”60

Balcerzak’s description of motion-capture echoes the experience of viewing A Christmas Carol: the spirits within the story become emblematic of the ghostly nature of the performing body. Carrey may maintain an indexical link to his digital Doppelgängers – and the latter may or may not translate this into a physical resemblance – but his movements haunt these characters. This evaluation of motion-capture technology and its affect is particularly relevant to A Christmas Carol because Zemeckis actively draws attention to the mechanisms behind the digital illusion. For the Blu-ray release of the film viewers can activate the special feature Behind the Carol: The Full Motion Capture Experience. This “picture-in-picture” viewing experience allows the spectator to watch the film on two screens: one which depicts the motion-capture sessions’ recording in the Volume, and the other displaying the finished animation.

In a manner comparable to how audiences were addressed by the illusion of Pepper’s Ghost and the trick effects of early cinema, viewers are encouraged to marvel at the technology on display, with Zemeckis pushing this experience further by displaying the illusion and its explanation simultaneously. But this viewing feature also encapsulates what is haunting about the motion-capture too: Carrey’s performance is abstracted into the digital character, who appears as only an echo or approximation of the real actor’s embodied presence. Carrey’s existence in Zemeckis’s film is pushed to the periphery – during the Blu-
ray’s special feature the real Carrey is exorcised into another frame altogether – existing like a ghost out of time and space.

The ghostly appearance of the living body is comparable to previous adaptations of A Christmas Carol in terms of both the uncanny impression this evokes for viewers and how such an experience can be historically contextualised. The characterisation of motion-capture as supernatural speaks to a wider dialogue concerning the impact of digital technologies upon recording, representing, and experiencing reality. The effect of digital technologies upon cinema and filmmaking practices has been hotly debated by theorists for several decades although it is interesting to note how some of these ideas appeal to images of the ghostly. Cinema’s conversion to digital has been characterised as a “death”; as an echo of previous practices, and the transmutation into another form; as the yearning for a time past expressed through nostalgia and cinephilia; as a technology haunted by its analogue aesthetics; and as the creation of a virtual “communication space” for viewers.61

Within such debates the notion of ‘cinema’ becomes both a ghost from the past and a spectre of the present as digital technology replaces, mimics, and preserves tradition notions of ‘film’ in various ways. Digital film can also collapse the boundaries between the representation of narrative themes and the technological mediation of such events. Marc Olivier reflects upon how the digital can become a spectral presence for the purposes of horror, a trend echoed by Pilar Blanco and Peeren when they observe how the creation of apparitions using new digital effects technologies becomes a reflection of the cultural reception of those technologies: “the increasing ghostliness of new media influences the representation of ghosts in new media”.62

These debates are evocative of the contexts in which Dickens wrote A Christmas Carol and the story’s early adaptations; as outlined earlier, Dickens’s work engages with similar 19th Century debates concerning the supernatural qualities of new technologies and portrayals of the human body. Zemeckis’s motion-capture version of the story re-activates these discussions, although the ghost of technology’s relationship to the body has been re-imagined again in the 21st Century, creating a renewed sense of haunting. For Dickens’s A Christmas Carol, literary representations of the supernatural were part of a larger discourse on the uncanny workings of the mind. The theatrical staging of A Christmas Carol using Pepper’s Ghost transported these ideas onto the live stage before early cinema, and Booth’s re-imagining of the tale, transformed this uncanniness into the projection and manipulation of the human body on-screen. When historicised in this fashion, Zemeckis’s A Christmas Carol

Frances A. Kamm, 'Technology, Adaptation, and the Motion-Captured Body in Zemeckis’s A Christmas Carol'
Film Journal 5 / Screening the Supernatural / 2019 / pp. 42-61

becomes simply another example of the ghosts in Dickens’s tales becoming an allegory for the mediation of their representation in a new form.

The uncanniness of the living bodies as spectres in Zemeckis’s film is evocative of early cinema, although the analysis of motion-capture in film theory speaks to the complexity of conceptualising the technology within its own 21st Century context. The motion-captured body is also symbolic of the body’s relationship to technology in the digital age. The convergence of the body with digital technology—which motion-capture epitomises—renders the lived experience as ghostly; the materiality of flesh, along with the physicality of media forms like film, become ethereal, existing only in virtual spaces. The literal “ghosting” of the motion-captured body described by Balzerzak becomes emblematic of the epistemological, cultural, and physical ‘ghosting’ enabled by technology which is described within discussions of post-modernism and, especially, post-humanism. The post-human body is one which is now inextricably entrenched within a world defined by technological enhancements and interactions. As N. Katherine Hayles argues: “it is no longer possible to distinguish meaningfully between the biological organism and the informational circuits in which the organism is enmeshed”. The human body, itself, thus becomes, following Balzerzak, the ‘aura’ to technology; a supernatural idea or memory. The motion-captured bodies in A Christmas Carol are emblematic of these contemporary concerns whereby the film’s representation of the supernatural acts as a reminder of how the body, in the digital age, becomes a haunted concept.

The Ghost of an Idea

Introducing a recent edited collection on cinematic ghosts, Murray Leeder comments how film is “a haunted medium, a haunting medium, a medium that puts us in touch with ghosts”. This description embodies the technology behind, and the experience of viewing, Zemeckis’s A Christmas Carol. As the reactions analysed in this article reveal, the supernatural themes of Dickens’s familiar story function to illuminate the haunting nature of the digital body. The spectacle of motion-capture technology is translated into the supernatural presence of living characters who embody undead features. Jim Carrey’s Scrooge inadvertently surmises this uncanny affect during the film’s opening as his first words become an emphatic statement on his own appearance: “Yes. Quite dead.” The audience engagement with Zemeckis’s film is comparable to the reception of Pepper’s Ghost, which Groth characterises as an “epistemological speculation, technological curiosity, and literary nostalgia.” For viewers of Zemeckis’s A Christmas Carol, this “nostalgia” is for other adaptations of Dickens’s work; the “curiosity” questions the director’s continued interest in motion-capture which has already been identified as uncanny; and a “speculation” arises as to whether this version of A

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63 N. Katherine Hayles, How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics
64 Leeder, Cinematic Ghosts, p. 8.
Christmas Carol should have been made at all. Above all else this article seeks to redeem Zemeckis’s use of the technology and to argue for the relevance of this re-imaging of A Christmas Carol within the histories of Dickens’s work and visual effects technologies.

By choosing A Christmas Carol as the vehicle for what would become the film-maker’s last experiment with motion-capture as a director, Zemeckis exposes the haunted nature of Dickens’s story. A Christmas Carol has been reincarnated in numerous guises since the book’s first publication, in what Paul Davis calls the story’s “culture-text”, which is constantly resurrected as an “altered spirit”.66 The uncanny nature of Zemeckis’s adaptation is heightened through comparisons to these earlier re-tellings of the story, which reveal not so much a completely “altered spirit” as much as a series of remarkable – and eerie – continuities. The adaptation of A Christmas Carol and the depiction of the book’s supernatural events illuminate a history of utilising new and novel technologies for portraying ghosts.

These technologies are part of the developments which influenced the emergence of cinema, and early trick films, like Scrooge; Or, Marley’s Ghost, demonstrate how the uncanniness of ghosts becomes superimposed upon the representation of living bodies on-screen. Motion-capture creates a fresh chapter in this longer story of how Dickens’s ghosts became emblematic of the technological mediation of the human body. There are, of course, significant differences between the contexts of reception for each of these adaptations, and so it is important to situate these historically. However, it is interesting to note how debates concerning the supernatural infuse these histories, underlining the ways in which the human body itself becomes increasingly ghostly.

The cultural value and significance of Dickens’s famous Christmas story is not, like Marley, “Quite dead”; in fact, the technological representation of the supernatural is part of the fabric of A Christmas Carol’s diverse history of adaptation, as the story was also developed for other media which were novel in their day, including the magic lantern, Edison’s sound cylinders and radio broadcasts.67 Zemeckis’s film continues this trend whilst feeding into wider debates on how new technologies are conceptualised in contemporary culture. Dickens himself provides a useful metaphor for how to bring together the complex concerns raised by Zemeckis’s film as discussed here. In the Preface to A Christmas Carol Dickens addresses the reader directly and calls his story “the ghost of an idea”. The phrase is pertinent, acting as a reminder of the significance of Zemeckis’s film. By analysing audience reactions, the historical precedents, and the scholarly debate which surround Zemeckis’s A Christmas Carol, the digital age reveals how it is the motion-captured body which is now this very “ghost of an idea”.

Coppola’s Luminous Shadows: Bram Stoker’s Dracula

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Dracula, that master of masks, can be read as the counterpart to the Victorian society that judges people by appearances. They both belong to the realm of shadows in so far as what they show is but deception, a shadow that seems to be the reality but that is in fact cast on a wall, a modern version of Plato’s Allegory of the Cave. Dracula rules over the world of representation, be it one of images or tales; he can only live if people believe in him and if light is not thrown on the illusion he has created. Victorian society is trickier: it is the kingdom of light, for it is the time when electric light was invented, a technological era in which appearances are not circumscribed by darkness but are masters of the day. It is precisely when the light is on that shadows can be cast and illusions can appear. Dracula’s ability to change appearances and play with artificiality (electric light and moving images) enhances the illusions created by his contemporaries in the late 19th Century.

Through the supernatural atmosphere of his 1992 film Bram Stoker’s Dracula, Francis Ford Coppola thus underlines the deep links between cinema and a society dominated by both science and illusion. And because cinema is both a diegetic and extra-diegetic actor, the
film conveys a criticism of the Victorian society whilst also presenting itself as a tribute to cinema, to art and to fantasy. Indeed, Coppola’s various filmic and artistic techniques and references to the history of cinema pay homage to ‘art for art’s sake’, the mantra associated with the Aesthetic Movement in 19th Century Britain, and which “shocked the Victorian establishment by challenging traditional values, foregrounding sensuality and promoting artistic, sexual and political experimentation” – and with, among others, Oscar Wilde.

Indeed, the century saw many rapid and strong changes that transformed British society. It was a time both of technological and scientific discoveries (in medicine, transportation, communication, production, picture, etc.) and of constraints that imprisoned individuals in certain roles and led people to internalize their feelings and identities. It is the conjunction of these elements that partly explains the birth of new art movements, and it is late in this period that, among others, Bram Stoker wrote Dracula (1897). Thus the film takes an ambiguous approach towards the Victorian era, criticizing the constraints it put on people (moral, scientific, etc.), and at the same time, making a visually enticing recreation of the period shows. The film therefore holds a fragile equilibrium between contradictory forces, creating a gothic-fantastic atmosphere where the supernatural and the rational collide.

**Art for Art’s Sake**

The film is stylised in the manner of a number of artistic trends of the period. The medieval, biblical and romantic scenes all seemingly refer to the work of Pre-Raphaelite painters, while Dracula is a dandy in some ways reminiscent of Oscar Wilde. The seduction scene between Mina and Dracula is strongly reminiscent, in its use of colours, themes, and mise-en-scène, of the work of some of the Pre-Raphaelites, with Lucy’s bright red hair inevitably reminding us of Dante Gabriel Rossetti. In the same way, the scenes in the garden can be seen as a reference to Arthur Hughes’s *April Love*, and the peacock whose feather hides the kiss between Mina and Harker appears to be a reference to Whistler’s *Peacock Room*. The scene where Elisabeta lies dead on the floor of the church makes a direct allusion to Millais’s *Ophelia*.

Elisabeta’s death is also Ophelia-like and the Shakespearean allusion is one of many in the film: when Dracula first meets Mina, a man appears carrying a board advertising John Irving as Hamlet at the Lyceum theatre. Of course, Coppola is here paying tribute not only to Bram Stoker but also to the theatre, to Shakespeare and to actors; and the tribute goes as far as filming some scenes as if they have come from Shakespeare’s plays. For instance, the campfire scene, with the three female vampires trying to take possession of Mina’s spirit and

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induce her seduction of Van Helsing is reminiscent of *Macbeth* (and its supernatural atmosphere). When Dracula tells Harker that "the victories of [his] great race are but a tale to be told", he is referencing Macbeth’s final soliloquy. Moreover, the décor and lighting of the scenes between Mina and Dracula, or Dracula and Harker, are highly ‘dramatic’. The many pictorial and theatrical references enable Coppola to offer the audience a visual spectacle rich in hybridity.

Coppola’s *Dracula* also pays tribute to the art of film by giving a brief history of the cinema through the deployment of the different techniques the film and photographic industry has invented over the years. The first shots of London recall the fixed images of tourist sites created by the Victorian photographic apparatus, and photography is an important element in the film, linking the people and places and enabling the story to develop as well as exposing the opposition between light and shade (the photos of Mina and Harker). But the director not only shows the devices the cinema has created suggest supernatural and magic atmospheres, he also uses them in their diversity: the *camera obscura*, the magic lantern, the phantasmagoria, the shadow theatre (all of them playing with lights, sometimes with mirrors and shadows), and the tricks and special effects of illusionists and conjurors.

The film also insists on the fact that the Victorian era was a time of invention which enabled cinema to become what it is today, for instance thanks to the invention of the apparatus for capturing and reconstituting sounds such as the gramophone and the phonograph (for example those belonging to Dr Seward and to Lucy). All these are present in Dracula’s castle as well as in the movie theatre to which Dracula takes Mina, where these devices give birth to the first camera presented to us as it films the characters on the street, and as the film extracts are shown (the Lumiere brothers’ *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* (Fr, 1895), and Méliès’ *The Devil’s Castle* and *The Vanishing Lady* (both Fr, 1896). Thus, the Victorian era is celebrated for the artistic inventions to which it gave birth, and the film is a way of enjoying its play with cinematic conventions as well the pleasure to be had from being a spectator at the very beginnings of the art of film.

Coppola also pays tribute to the gothic-fantastic genre to which the story of Dracula belongs. The neo-gothic architecture of the film was born in the Victorian era at the time of the Gothic Revival movement. The *mise-en-scène* involves mist, *chiaroscuro*, nocturnal darkness, basic or sophisticated special effects (doors opening mysteriously, Dracula flying in the air, Dracula’s metamorphoses), archetypal colours (blue for the magic energy field, red for sexuality, murder and evil, black for the devil), and plays on the mysteries of light and

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5 See Sigrid Anderson Cordell, ‘Sex, Terror, and Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*: Coppola’s Reinvention of Film History’, *Neo-Victorian Studies*, vol. 6 no. 1, 2013, pp. 1–21.

shadow. Moreover, the references to previous Dracula films create an uncanny atmosphere, as for example the scene when Dracula rises from his coffin as straight as a pike, a direct reference to Murnau’s *Nosferatu* (Germany, 1922).⁷ Coppolla’s *Dracula* benefits from what other productions brought to the character of the vampire, for if Nosferatu is a devilish and repulsive figure, the convention of the more attractive Dracula first appeared in 1931 when Bela Lugosi played the part in the Tod Browning’s film; in Terence Fisher’s *The Curse of Frankenstein* (UK, 1957), Christopher Lee confirmed the trend.

Coppolla’s uncanny, phantasmagorical, and mesmerizing atmosphere is also inspired by Cocteau’s *Beauty and the Beast* (France, 1945–1946); indeed, Dracula’s castle looks like the Beast’s, with its statues and strange candlesticks.⁸ Other cinematic references may be helpful here: when Lucy is being exorcised, a parallel can be drawn with Regan in William Friedkin’s *The Exorcist* (USA, 1974), and the phosphorescent fog is that of John Carpenter’s *Fog* (USA, 1979). On a more humorous note, and perhaps in a tribute to Coppola’s old friend George Lucas, the old and wrinkled face of Dracula shrouded in a black hood, appearing out of the darkness, is like that of the Emperor in George Lucas’s *Star Wars* (the first trilogy, 1977–1983). Where music is concerned, we should not forget the atmospheric contribution by Wojciech Kilar – who also wrote the music for Grimault’s *The King and the Mockingbird* (France, 1980), based on the fairy-tale by Hans Christian Andersen – or, at another angle, the part of Renfield, the insect-eating lunatic, played by musician/actor Tom Waits.

**Class Conflict**

The artistic references in the film appear to evince a strong binary opposition between the world of the aristocracy, on the one hand, and the bourgeoisie on the other. The aristocracy is represented by Dracula himself, on the face of it a well-mannered prince, proud of his ancestors and his traditions, and driven by a strong sense of honour. (And of course, he also embodies idleness and seduction.)⁹ That is why on a visual level he is fascinating, and that is also why his clothes, his strange beauty, and his behaviour are so alluring. Since in his world he is used to being obeyed, he goes on commanding (Mina to see him, Lucy to obey him and become a vampire). His ascendancy over the world is represented by his far-seeing eyes and by the shadows covering his territories and surrounding those over which he rules. However, Dracula exerts a devilish hold but also embodies an aristocratic power which is fading. It is

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not surprising, therefore, that even if Transylvania is in his grip, his castle is falling into ruin. There is no life in a building which seems to be partly alive only at night, except on the day Dracula leaves for Europe, which could perhaps herald some kind of rebirth.

Dracula’s quest for Mina is in a certain sense a case of the aristocracy looking for an alliance with the bourgeoisie. To Dracula, she is the late aristocratic Elisabeta, but in England he introduces himself as ‘Prince Vlad’ and she is simply Mina Murray. This shift (from old customs and alliances to new ones) underlines how bourgeoisie has become a means for the aristocracy to survive. This opposition can also be found in the scene taking place in Dracula’s castle when Harker’s photo of Mina visually separates him from Dracula. They compete to rule both over Mina’s heart and the modern world. Mina can thus be seen as the only hope of a union between the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie. Indeed, Dracula is dying because so too is the aristocracy. Only shadows and murmurs inhabit the castle, those of the female ghouls obeying Dracula, luring men to their destruction – part Sirens, part Gorgons.

They tell the audience that modern civilisation has not yet reached the castle and that it is still an ancient place whence noblemen rule the world; unreachable, they are also mysterious and unknown. Technological progress and science have either given access to or destroyed their territories. When Dracula dies, his castle really becomes a mausoleum. Tales, legends and superstitions feed on the unknown and give the aristocracy a power which seems magic because it is eternal and devilish. In London, Lucy belongs to this dying aristocracy, that is why she is bound to die, and she dies listening to the song of the arising bourgeoisie (the gramophone) embodied by Mina. Lucy is the only heir of her family, and she will not have the time to give birth to a new generation – she is the victim of Zeus/Dracula who turns into rain to seduce her and inseminate her with death. Mina is also contaminated but she will survive for she is not an aristocrat.

Cinema calls on imagination, myths and tales which existed before its birth to transmit stories about the world and how the world works.\textsuperscript{10} The visual code Coppola uses is well-known: the red colour in which Lucy dresses represents aroused sexuality, and the copulation scene between Lucy and the beast is polysemous: it is reminiscent of Fuseli’s \textit{The Nightmare} (1781) with the lecherous goblin on a sleeping young woman, but it can also remind one of Conan Doyle’s \textit{The Hound of the Baskervilles} telling the story of a curse on the last heir of a lineage (1901). These references also hint at how the supernatural can be explained in more down-to-earth ways: sexual frustration and repression\textsuperscript{11} as explained by psychoanalysis, on the one hand, and basic human instincts on the other. Moreover, the criticism of a frustrating Victorian society leading individuals to become others can be seen as a reference to Jack the Ripper and his bestial murders of prostitutes. There again, cinema draws from culture to show


on the screen what the audience thought was only in their imagination. Eventually, this scene can also be a reference to pious images describing the devil’s deeds.

Lucy is the libertine/dissolute aristocracy that does not follow the austere principles of the era. Mina, for her part, represents the new bourgeoisie and also the women who, in the Victorian period, did not want to be identified with their gender role in society: she is educated and a writer. Mina has the power of the words, but her margin of individual freedom is limited by her social class and by what the society at the time could accept. It is no surprise, then, that Mina finds a copy of The Arabian Nights in Lucy’s study, a book which is important for two reasons: both because the sexual acts it describes belong to what must not be shown or alluded to in Victorian society, and contrariwise because the book is thus the place where fantasy can be unleashed. The transition from novel to cinema is then obvious: the cinema has taken over the role of the written word, and, moreover, it has also brought fantasy and dreams much closer to the real than ever before (is the copulation scene between Lucy and the beast real or does it belong to the realm of fantasy?).

The aristocracy is at risk when Lucy is shown not being a paragon of virtue and respectability, when she cannot adequately embody the steadiness of earnest and respectable Victorian society. Because Lucy is a playful and innocent seductress who wears eccentric and provocative clothing, who makes the most of the leisure society in which she was born (listening to the gramophone), denying at the same time an era in which austerity and profitability are key, she thus embodies a dying world. So does the party scene taking place at Lucy’s in which the black veil symbolizing Dracula swallows the different characters to eventually close on the old and wrinkled face of the prince/vampire. This reference to the Emperor in Star Wars leads us towards the dark side which is present in Lucy and in each of the characters. The same effect occurs when Harker, on his way to Dracula’s castle, reads a letter from Dracula at nightfall – he turns into a shadow on to which falls a ray of light. Harker is thus characterised by a dual personality: he follows rational and moral standards on the one hand, and on the other he succumbs to the fundamental pleasures of the flesh.

Herein lies the fiction’s criticism of Victorian society: by compelling people to pretend to be who they are not, it leads them to become even more dangerous. For instance, it is when Lucy and then Mina do not openly correspond to what is expected of Victorian women that society – in the persons of Dr Seward and Van Helsing – decides they need to be cured or to be excluded. Lucy cannot really be sexually free, she has to get married and provide her noble family with an heir. It is because she plays the seductress that she dies, and only then can she unleash her drives. When Lucy lies in her glass coffin, clothed in her white wedding dress, she looks like a parody of a pure and immaculate Snow-White waiting for her Prince Charming to come and wake her with a kiss. But here the kiss of the prince has turned her into a vampire, and the reversal of the fairy tale is not trivial: it asserts that outward appearance does not reflect the true nature of the being. And once dead, in her white dress, she also becomes Andersen’s Snow Queen, the queen who bewitches and enslaves young men thanks to a broken piece of mirror. Victorian society wants its members to look virtuous, but even the
most heinous murderers can manage to look virtuous and so escape justice. Van Helsing, for example, is a professor, a doctor, a scientist, a philosopher, and a man of faith, he is to be trusted and he is supposed to be protective. Yet as soon as he no longer has to keep up appearances, he is authoritarian, violent, and a sexual predator.

At the same time this society condemns those who do not seem to conform, notably Lucy and the young American. Only those who refuse to follow the Victorian social rules of conduct die: Lucy because she plays the vamp, Dracula who keeps changing appearances, and Quincey who remains himself never pretending to be who he is not. It is no coincidence that Quincey is the archetypal Texan. Plainspoken and someone who does not hide his feelings, he has not been moulded by the English society: his appurtenances are meaningful – he carries a hunting knife and gun in a new world where nature is not yet totally dominated by technology. He embodies the Rousseau-esque state of nature as opposed to Victorian civilisation. In this sense, the only characters fit to survive in this industrial era are the representatives of the rising bourgeoisie: Harker, the young estate agent whose white hair represents his acquired respectability and self-control; Dr. Seward, who embodies modernity and the advanced scientific era; and Van Helsing and the priest – both roles played by Anthony Hopkins, who is also the main narrator – who is the link between the past and the present, mediating between an era in which religion was all-powerful and an era in which science has become so.

He embodies the power of the dark side, the power that rules behind the rulers, as reflected by his lustful behaviour towards Mina and his murderous madness towards Dracula. His madness also reminds one of Jack the Ripper, and one wonders whether Van Helsing is not an allusion to the notorious Whitechapel killer since, after all, his only victims are female. Dracula, Lucy and Lord Arthur Holmwood are doomed because they are the last of their kind: Lord Arthur has no noble wife to give him heirs; Dracula is the last representative of nobility, but his time has come to an end as he himself announces during Harker’s first meal in the castle: “blood is too precious a thing in these times; the warlike days are over; the victories of my great race are but a tale to be told; I am the last of my kind.” This overarching opposition between the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie can also be found in the film’s contrasts between the Victorian spirit – rational, scientific, and materialistic – and the medieval spirit in which fantasy, tales and traditions are embedded.

A Spiritual Story

Dracula is a story dealing with spirits in the full meaning of the word (that is both supernatural beings, and minds – scientific, religious, etc.). It is the story of the struggle between different spirits, and it shows the victory of reason over fantasy: the first place the camera visits in London is the lunatic asylum, where imagination is locked up and controlled by rationality. The film tells the story of this fight as symbolized in the figure of Dracula. This is also the confrontation between a scientific era of technological revolutions and a pre-industrial era, between the rising bourgeoisie represented by Harker and the archaic religious and aristocratic world of Dracula. It tells of the handing over of power, the change from one
civilisation to another and it is shown by two scenes linked by the ‘eye of the peacock feather eye – the scene with Mina and Harker in Lucy’s garden, and that of Harker’s journey on the train. This trip is already a brief summary of the political and economic history of Great Britain since the railway can be seen as the symbol of the British industrial power, spreading most of the civilized and colonized world and enabling access to the remotest and least industrialised part of Eastern Europe.

The tunnel symbolizes the frontier between the civilized, rationalistic and scientific world of Western Europe, and especially the all-powerful Britain, and a world so far untouched by the industrial revolution and scientific knowledge, a place still under the power of the unknown and of superstition. Moreover, this scene is introduced by another in which Mina leads Harker to a bower in the garden so as to kiss him unnoticed. In this scene, their kiss is hidden by the dim bower and by the peacock feather which also symbolizes the veil with which Victorian society covers over matters related to sexuality. The camera here plays the role of Victorian censorship. The peacock feather is the fan protecting decency, but the peacock also symbolizes sins. Then the ‘eye’ of the peacock feather is the link with the following scene as it turns into the mouth of the tunnel and the cry of the peacock turns into the whistling of the steam locomotive. Later serving also as a link to Dracula’s blue eye, the ‘eye’ of the feather also serves as a transition between two worlds and of two ways of looking at the world: Dracula’s blue eye is all-seeing, for there is nothing to hide, the tunnel marks a symbolic passage between cultures and moralities which are different and yet complementary. The image of the locomotive moving forward, over the leaves of Harker’s diary, implies continuity: the narrative goes on but now the written work tells a story that crosses boundaries/frontiers, and also symbolizes the entry in the world of fantasy, into a narrative infused with supernatural concerns.

Coppola manipulates the film’s spectators and deceive their senses. When the key image of filmic narrative (the train) is superposed on the written narrative (the diary), the audience enters the realm of tales and legends, and suddenly what seemed to be only in their minds (their fear, their hopes, etc.) becomes tangible, and they are invited to believe what they are shown. The narrative starts and ends in the same precise place because the tale always comes back to its birthplace and origins: it dies in order to be born again, just as Dracula does. The film claims Dracula’s story to be historically authentic on two occasions: the pre-title sequence goes back to 1492 to recount his story, and then Van Helsing reads a reference book on Dracula. The film narrative and the written narrative are once again superposed and united to give strength and reality to the myth and to the character, blurring the border between story and history.

The film sees the Carpathians as a doomed place where anything can happen, where night is mysterious and dangerous. It is the realm of the supernatural where slatterns can turn into princesses and human beings can turn into werewolves, when evil breaks upon the world. It is the country which has not been reached by light, a land of obscurantism literal and metaphorical. Scientific progress has brought light to England (in Dr Seward’s room, the lamp
is used to find Dracula hidden in a dark corner), but it has not reached these remote lands. Thus, right from the start, this country is dominated by shadows: the shadow theatre staging Dracula’s armies fighting, Dracula’s dragon-shaped helmet (symbol of his lineage), the ascendancy of Islam over the Christian world (a shadow contested by Dracula’s red scaly gauntlet). Light and shadows, red and black, shadows of impaled people: it is a phantasmagoria. Coppola uses these techniques to emphasize the darkness and bloodiness of the place and character, creating a phantasmagoric landscape of light and shade, the shadows of the impaled, contrasting reds and blacks. We might recall that the colour red/pink, symbolizing blood and Dracula’s power (his armour, his ascendancy over Lucy, and especially the estates he buys in London that he circles with red) was also the colour traditionally used by British cartographers to designate the territories of the worldwide British Empire of the period.

In spite of surface change, those who truly rule keep in the background and themselves never change. Anthony Hopkins plays two such characters in the film: the priest who sends Dracula on a holy war and who damns Elisabeta, and Van Helsing, the philosopher-metaphysician (reason, religion and medicine all embodied in one man) who leads his companions on a crusade against Dracula. Religion, reason and science seem to be cut from the same cloth: from time immemorial convincing orators have managed to impose their vision of the world and led people on crusades against religious, superstitious or moral heresy. If religion backed the secular power of the kings, the new society is backed by science which gets rid of its predecessors by accusing them of scientific and moral heresy. Indeed, when during his lecture on blood Van Helsing claims that “civilization and syphilization have advanced together”, he insists on the role of science working hand in hand with moral standards, a role that religion used to play alone.

Jack the Ripper once again looms large. He killed prostitutes by night and in dark alleys, becoming a creature of the night and in the process entering urban mythology for well over a century. He is a pendant to Dracula who, though a literary figure, is also a night creature and an important a figure in British culture. This link between the two figures, through the character of Van Helsing who embodies the different aspects of society that constrain human imagination and needs (religious dogma, austere science, a sexual predator and repressor, etc.), makes its own contribution to the supernatural atmosphere induced by the blurring of frontiers between reality and fiction, and by the role played by the opposition between reason and sexual urges. Whereas Jack was never identified, and so in one sense his story has never ended, Dracula must die because he does not conform to the new religious ideology of the bourgeoisie, and because he is the embodiment of fantasy which the normative society and the rational mind fight relentlessly.

Entering Dracula’s castle means entering the world of fantasy, as suggested by the circle of blue light Harker which crosses, blue being a colour which regularly indicates fantasy in the film (Dracula’s spectacles, for instance). Until Harker reaches the meeting point, he is not betrayed by his senses, but when at night he is left on his own in the middle of nature, he is
first surrounded by the characters and sounds typical of the supernatural narrative, such as wolves and their howling, and vampires nailed with crosses, and then his senses begin to fail him. Once he enters Dracula’s castle, he can no longer trust his senses: he walks in the world of fantasy, of illusion, of art – and of cinema. Harker is the mirror image of the spectator: the blue light can then be seen as the blue screen used for tricks and special effects, and also as the screen on which the film is shown. When crossing the threshold of Dracula’s castle, Harker crosses the dividing line between the real world and the sphere of tales and myths. When Harker is invited into Dracula’s castle, the spectator is invited to come into the world of the artist, believing what they are going to be shown and told, as is the rule with cinema.

The film’s play with light and shade focuses the spectator’s attention on what they must see, on what they are required to see. A clear parallel is thus drawn between the power of the cinema and the power of Dracula himself: like the film-maker, he is the master of darkness and illumination. In his castle, he controls what people see, deceiving human senses (he never is where Harker expects him to be). Everyday perceptions are no longer trustworthy, because Dracula, and the cinema, are now playing with them. There is also an allusion here to Plato’s Allegory of the Cave: we should not trust our senses since shadows are not reality but only a distorted vision of it, and cinema, too, may appear to be reality but is in fact only a vision of it. Whereas in Plato human beings would rather believe a lie than the truth, the cinema does not lie about its own nature. In the scenes taking place in Transylvania, the references to legends, myths and oral traditions are underlined to show that cinema was not born out of nothing, but feeds on other artistic forms: it is their heir. Cinema is born of legends – Dracula would not exist without them. Moreover, Stoker’s imagination, which had been fed with Irish legends, is present in the film when the scene at Lucy’s opens up on a harp, the symbol of Ireland and of its cultural and mythological heritage.

It comes as no surprise that in the castle Dracula’s shadow, cast upon a map of London, is used as a transition between the imaginary world of Dracula and that of London in 1897. Until that point, fantasy and reality are clearly divided; they represent two worlds, two spaces which almost never mix except in people’s minds. However, when Dracula bends over London, then fantasy enters into reality. In showing newspaper reports of Dracula’s coming to London, the film reminds us of the development of the press, and of the reading public, during the 19th Century. In turn, it also reminds us that while newspapers are supposed to convey factual information, they also trade on people’s fears. The scene in which Dracula reads about the mysterious events taking place in London symbolizes the intrusion of the imaginary world into the news and into reality. When at the beginning of the scene Dracula seems to be in a film being shot, the film scrolls and shows what the first films made with the first tripod cameras showed: the filming of reality. Yet, in this scene, fantasy intrudes once again into the filming of reality. Coppola reminds us here that this complex fusion of the real and the fantastical is from the very start at the heart of cinema.

This explains why eyes are such an important feature of the film, since they are not only human but also the basic mechanism of representation – the ‘eye’ of the camera, too. Eyes
are thus at the core of the film, whether they be Dracula’s eyes in the sky, the different pairs of spectacles (Renfield’s, Dracula’s), Mina’s binoculars, Dracula’s watching Mina and vice versa, and Dracula’s determination to make her see what he wishes her to. Dracula leads Mina into the world of cinema – he wants to see the technological wonder of the civilized world, but she first resists by talking about culture and museums. However, she lets herself be charmed and follows him. Yet, after having vainly tried to oppose culture to the imaginary world embodied by Dracula/cinema, she tries to oppose science to it, but she once again fails. The world of fantasy, of the supernatural that science means to kill by rationalizing life, makes fun of science as it uses it for its own sake (science has given birth to cinema and enables it to live on).

Dracula not only leads Mina into his personal playground but he also invites the audience to enter a cinema, thus creating a true mise-en-abîme of the situation in which they find themselves as viewers of Coppola’s film. Then the wolf creates a panic which enables the fleeing Mina to show the audience of Dracula what takes place on the other side of the screen. It is also a device for recounting to us the history of cinema, of tales and the story of Dracula, since the shadow theatre tells the same story we were offered at the beginning of the film. There is once again an allusion to Plato’s Allegory of the Cave, since the image appearing on the wall/screen is not real, but indeed a screen between reality and fantasy, a border which can be crossed by intermediate figures such as Dracula. Mina cannot fight Dracula for he is as real as the world surrounding her, a figure who moves between the worlds of ‘nature’ and of ‘culture’. He knows how to make the most of both worlds: he may be a very worldly and sophisticated fellow, yet he can cross over into the world of animals to talk to wolves.

He is excessive in a world of civilisation which prefers to suppress or eliminate that which it cannot control (Dr. Seward’s asylum is symbolic here). The seduction scenes between Dracula and Mina represent the reconciliation between the beings and their fantasy world, their deeper selves and their nature. When Dracula declares that “Absinthe is the aphrodisiac of the self; the green fairy who lives in the absinthe wants your soul, but you are safe with me”, the bottom of the glass turns into the eye of the camera, and Mina’s memories/visions appear on the screen. Indeed, it is alcohol that enables Mina to free her imagination, which leads her to cross the borders of propriety to speak her thoughts, to give birth to a tale – that of Dracula and Elisabeta, the eye of the camera at the bottom of the glass drawing a parallel between the intoxications provided by both alcohol and cinema. This scene can also be read as suggesting the cathartic effect of art on human beings, enabling them to free themselves from the limitations of frustration and propriety.

Thus it is obvious why Mina, when she meets Dracula, does not want to go to the cinema and cannot accept it as a form of culture: in a society which denies and kills fantasy, she can only talk of museums, which in this film symbolize death, history and rationality. They tell about the worldwide powerful Britain, showcasing the treasures brought back from the colonies. In the film, the museum can also symbolize civilisation at its best, as in the references to Madame Curie and to hard science, but here again, science is also seen as the
bringer of death, not life. That is why the film appears at moments to be a science
documentary, speeded up to demonstrate the decay of flowers, vegetation and hence of life
itself. The scientific side of the film is also present when Renfield’s glasses are used as
microscopes to study insects. With its account of the nutritive elements, the film then turns
into a kind of instructional text which teaches the viewers that to stay alive, one has to kill;
the less scientific character of all (Renfield) is the one who has got the soundest vision on life –
there is always a prey and a hunter. Dracula hunts in order to feed, whereas Van Helsing only
hunts to kill.

Thus the blood cells seen through the microscope can be understood as pointing to the
deadly effects of some recent diseases on human blood (such as AIDS), but the images also
emphasise the ‘colder’ side of science and medicine, all the more so when Van Helsing
performs a risky blood transfusion and associates sexuality with death. Indeed, there is
nothing mesmerizing and beautiful in these quasi-scientific scenes of mortality, whereas the
kind of death brought about by Dracula – as seen by him, at any rate – is less despairing, and
indeed attractive. When Mina asks Dracula to “take [her] away from all this death”, she
speaks from the standpoint of a Victorian society which is in a sense death itself since it forbids
individuals to accept as natural their bodily needs. The imaginary and fantasy worlds human
beings create are in this sense more alive than the society which condemns and even kills
them. The only way to flee from this world is through death.

In such a context it is even possible to ask oneself whether Van Helsing is not so much
the embodiment of science as the embodiment of the Victorian way of death. Indeed, when
he performs an autopsy, he cuts the head and tears out the heart – two core elements of
feelings and imagination. Van Helsing’s inheritor, Dr Seward, for his part, tries to analyse and
rationalise everything, but his frustration with the impossibility of such a task is what leads
him to resort to drugs. His need to understand, to inquire, to rationalize, to study and to take
drugs draws a parallel between him and another major character of the Victorian era –
Sherlock Holmes. The allusion to Conan Doyle is made through the beast-like Dracula in Lucy’s
garden, perhaps reminiscent of the creature terrorising the moors in The Hound of the
Baskervilles.

Van Helsing is a metaphysician-philosopher, and as such he embodies all the research
associated with the Victorian era. This also explains why, when he is with Seward, he talks
about mesmerism, hypnosis and magnetic fields. These theories go along electobiology and
the myth of Frankenstein. Fantasy warns us that when human beings want to tame nature
rather than understand it, they create monsters, as the stories of Frankenstein and Dracula
remind us. The new technology of the age can be of a great rational and scientific help, for
instance the telegraph (a Victorian invention which enables Dr Seward to get in touch with
Van Helsing) or the phonograph (Dr. Seward records his comments on his patients). But the

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12 For background, see Martin Willis and Catherine Wynne, Victorian Literary Mesmerism, Amsterdam: Rodopi,
2006.
machine can also help art – Lucy listens to music on her gramophone, and the narrative is ‘written’ on Mina’s typewriter.

Indeed, the scenes involving the typewriter are of considerable relevance here. The machine was invented at the end of the 19th Century and thanks to it, Mina, the schoolmistress (at a time of important education reforms), can create her diary and correspond with her fiancé, Harker. Lucy blames him for compelling Mina to use this invention just because it is modern, but Mina in fact subverts the original purpose of the typewriter by recording her dreams, hopes and fantasies, creating ‘a story’. Mina reminds one in this sense of Mary Shelley – she is learned, and her appearances do not let one suppose she can have such a wild imagination. Indeed, Dracula is the product of her imagination, her dream of a wild passion; and it is through the letters she exchanges with Harker that the story of Dracula is being written, the letters symbolizing the process of writing.

The scientific progress represented in the film enhances the importance of the technological inventions born in the Victorian age, thus underlining Britain’s global power in this period, but it also shows that imagination is born out of frustration, and that imagination, the supernatural, and fantasy always manage to appear where they are least expected. The Victorian world attempted to conquer ancient worlds whose traditions conflict with the cold rationality mind of the ‘new’ Britain, exactly the conflict represented by the struggle between the emerging British bourgeoisie and the historic nobility associated with Dracula. Those who embody this older world are doomed to die: Dracula cannot command a reflection in the mirror because he does not belong in this world of cold science and mere reality. The emblematic symbol of the wolf, in its linkage to Dracula, then takes on another meaning: Dracula is the wolf and vice versa: they induce fear, which gives way to superstition, and leads inexorably to the extermination of the monster – that which cannot be identified or known, the aspect of ourselves we cannot see or will not acknowledge.

Dracula may die, but the myth lives on because it is the embodiment of some of our deepest fears. At the same time, thanks in this case to the cinema, he is even more alive than ever; previously he was only a character belonging to the world of oral or literary story-telling. Science gives reality to dreams. Thus, Dracula can die under the spotlights (in the final Christ-like scene), but he has now come back to life again thanks to the power of cinematic narration. As the film comes to a close, eyes are once again the centre of attention in a scene which carries a variety of meanings. Light is cast on Dracula’s face, turned towards the sky; he is human again. The scene may perhaps point to the reconciliation societal constraint and human imagination: on the ceiling of the dome, it is not God reaching out his hand towards man, it is Dracula holding Elisabeta’s hand, perhaps a sign of human beings making peace with the impulses of their deeper selves. It may also be suggestive of the film camera looking upon the origins of cinema itself. But the scene may also signify the rebirth of human imagination: Dracula, the one who could only live in darkness, that light could destroy so easily, is born again into the light and he no longer needs to hide. As light and darkness are reconciled and resolved, he has become immortal and he is loved.
Modernity, Commodification, and Spiritual Affiliation in *Rosemary’s Baby*

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Introduction

In the early scenes of *Rosemary’s Baby* protagonist Rosemary Woodhouse (played by Mia Farrow) is shown renovating the Manhattan apartment she has just rented with her husband Guy (John Cassavetes). Painters apply white paint to the dark wood that adorns the gloomy interiors; the flat is re-painted, re-carpeted, re-furnished, and Rosemary hangs new curtains and lines the shelves of a mysteriously concealed closet. She pauses in her home-making to watch her husband’s TV commercial for the “the swingin’ world of Yamaha”. Later she is interrupted by a comically intrusive neighbour, Minnie Castevet (Ruth Gordon), who comes to introduce herself and see the apartment which has recently been vacated by her recently deceased friend, Mrs. Gardenia. Commenting on the brightness of the home and its modern design, Minnie flatters Rosemary even as she questions the cost of these adornments, the choice of which has been influenced by the world of magazines. In this way, from early on, the Woodhouse family seems to be aligned with impulses involving covering the old, ushering in the new, and establishing a sense of self *vis-à-vis* expensive and fashionably arranged accoutrements – all of this thanks to the support of the media which provide suggestions for what to buy, the means whereby these items may be acquired, and indications of where and how these products should be artfully displayed.
The young couple apparently relies upon methods of identification that are thus more closely aligned with modernity, while their elderly next-door neighbours Minnie and Roman Castevet (Sidney Blackmer) seem to provide an antithesis to this as they question this acquisitive impulse in favour of furthering a sense of generational community. Indeed, if the characters of Rosemary and Guy Woodhouse are determined – initially, at least – by the objects with which they surround themselves, then the Castevets in turn are defined by the people to whom they are connected. This turns out to be a witches’ coven, a sacramental spiritual group begun by Roman Castevet’s father, Adrian Mercato, whose legacy is now perpetuated by the son. It is this essential conflict of the old versus the new, the traditional versus the modern, and the rational versus the supernatural, that is central not only to the film, but also to the culture from which the work sprang.

This article addresses the connections between the film and its larger socio-political milieu through debates around modernity and modernism developed by theorists such as Daniel Bell, Christopher Lasch, and Marshall Berman, all of whom, while espousing a range of political ideologies from conservative to liberal, nonetheless arrive at similar conclusions with regard to the importance of traditionalism – specifically adherence to a system of faith, acknowledgement of historical legacy and assimilating within a community – in establishing a cohesive culture. Connections between these debates and the artistic output of the era is supported by a textual analysis of the film in order to locate thematic and aesthetic concerns with the instability of the culture of commodification and the way in which spirituality, negative or otherwise, might function to provide a grounding mechanism for the building of a stable sense of self.

I will be considering narrative characterization, the issue of conflict, and the use of symbolism, as well as the film’s aesthetic concerns with the Gothic. The Gothic – a movement established, it could be argued, in reaction to the lauding of reason brought about as a result of the age of Enlightenment – provides a formal embodiment of the same essential debates. Indeed, Rosemary’s Baby deploys tropes such as enclosure, entrapment, isolation, and the acceptance of the possibility of the supernatural, all couched within the here-and-now of New York City, a setting that is, as suggested by Berman and others, an archetype of modernity, forward thinking, and rationality itself. Finally, the critical responses to the film’s release in both secular and religious popular media will be addressed, emanating from influential sources such as The New York Times and the National Catholic Office of Motion Pictures (formerly The National League of Decency).

**Traditionalism and Modernity**

The period between the mid-1960’s and the mid-1970s was a time of vast social, political and cultural paradigm shifts, and many scholars argued as to whether this socio-political transition would in fact result in a return to traditionalism, a looking back toward the orthodoxies of the past, or a continued and potentially increased embrace of a forward-looking, counter-cultural ethos. On the one hand, traditionalism was regarded as
possessing positive attributes, offering mechanisms of stabilization and historic cohesion, including imperatives such as orthodox religion and familial legacy. Such stabilizing influences, however, were equally regarded as being stultifying and repressive even if their rejection could potentially lead to an increasing fragmentation of society and, by extension, of the individuals living in it. As Marshall Berman suggests: “This drive [to go on endlessly creating the world anew] draws all modern men and women into its orbit, and forces us to grapple with the question of what is essential, what is meaningful, what is real in the maelstrom in which we move and live.” Considering Jane Jacobs’ *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), he goes on to comment: “It seems to me that beneath her modernist text there is an anti-modern subtext, a sort of undertow of nostalgia for a family and a neighbourhood in which the self could be securely embedded, ‘einfeste Burg’, a solid refuge against all the dangerous currents of freedom and ambiguity in which all modern men and women are caught up.”

For Berman, the American metropolis may be regarded as a signifier of, and a locus for, these debates. On the one hand, the urban environment becomes a symbol for the vigour, variety, and richness of life that are celebrated by modernity and around which this forward-focused, individualistic ethos has crystallised and is furthered. However, this diversity could also breed an underlying traditionalist sentiment. Within the urban landscape, not only could a nostalgia for family and neighbourhood be located, but there could equally exist the potential for a concomitant establishment of orthodox mechanisms of faith which, arguably, together ground both the private and the public realms. Indeed, it was religion that held the family together historically, and ideally the spiritual congregation that provided a sense of community wherein the family could thrive. According to Hugh McLeod, religion could allow for the establishment of, “tightly knit subcultures with highly distinctive dogmatic beliefs”, thus providing the potential for a shared sense of stability.

These concerns with modernity were equally the concerns of the artistic discourse of the Gothic, which arose out of a similar socio-political landscape. This literary genre involves a critique of the mechanisms of traditionalism such as orthodox Catholicism, whilst equally setting itself up in opposition to modernity and the influence of the Enlightenment by issuing a warning against wholehearted acceptance of the rational over all else. As David Punter suggests, the Gothic “strove to eschew the contemporary world, the world of commerce and the middle class”. The 18th Century was embroiled in debates over the efficacy of the old and the traditional in opposition to the lure of the new; the traditions that once acted as mechanisms of stabilisation were questioned as to their social, political,

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and cultural relevance. If in fact the contemporary world was one in which a new era of ordered rationalism prevailed, then the Gothic, by ushering in a thematic concern with the chaotic supernatural, seemed to be playing, in an almost literal sense, the Devil’s advocate. Punter supports this assertion when he notes, “fear is recognised as the primary means by which the dictates of reason can be bypassed.”

The roles of commodification and radical individualism were also the subject of debate. Acquisitiveness could be seen as a mechanism supportive of self-identification, and it was this drive toward re-invention that was contrasted with more traditional elements of stabilisation as described above. On the one hand, such a freedom was in many ways liberating for those without a sense of position, while on the other, it offered the potential for increased insecurity should this acquisitive impulse fail to bear fruit. As Daniel Bell argues, the unfolding of capitalism “sought initially to unify economy, character structure, and culture in a common frame”. But, in a major contradiction, it “destroyed the keystone of that character – the sober, prudential, delayed gratification of the Protestant ethic – with the acquisitive impulses unleashed by the technological revolution of the consumer-durable culture, aided by the sociological innovation of the installment plan and consumer credit.”

It is for this reason that religious belief is often considered vital socio-politically, not only because it functions to hold society together, but also because it fosters a belief in something outside the realm of the self and self-interest.

Indeed, not only does the ideal of the faith community offer grounding and stability, it also provides a curb that sets limits on individual action. If there is a key to a healthy culture, it is, for Bell, the establishment of limits, and the key contradiction to which he alludes in The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism: the modernist culture of the mid-1960s and 1970s finds itself at the pinnacle of a trajectory that has effectively effaced all the limitations that a healthy culture must necessarily establish. Bell perceives the cultural realm to be “one of self-expression and self-gratification. It is anti-institutional and antinomian in that the individual is taken to be the measure of satisfaction, and his feelings, sentiments, and judgments, not some objective standard of quality and value, determine the worth of cultural objects.” He goes on to suggest that it is the freedom of self-actualization that typifies the Zeitgeist of modernity, as the self in an increasingly secular culture knows no limits or boundaries. Furthermore, any self-regulating economic system, when freed from external controls, runs the risk of fostering the same problematic identification; because of an increased focus on commodities, an individual is defined by his or her accumulation of wealth above all else.

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4 Punter, p. 45.
6 Bell, The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism, p. xvii.
In the past, these tendencies toward accumulation have been curbed by ascetic Protestantism, instilling the belief that the moral man is one who toils and who defers gratification in order to please God, increase his kingdom, and guarantee heavenly rewards. In this way, religion held the radical individualist in check and hampered any hedonistic tendencies. However, once appetites had been awakened, and in turn were fostered and increased by a society that links accumulation with meaning and success, agency in and of itself became just another commodity to be bought and sold. During this period, a radical individualist approach to religion seemed to be more appropriate not only to contemporary culture but could also be applied retrospectively to historic America. Bellah et al comment: “The American pattern of privatizing religion while at the same time allowing it some public functions has proven highly compatible with the religious pluralism that has characterized America from the colonial period and grown more and more pronounced […] religion is perceived as a matter of individual choice.”? Would this shift ultimately result in an increased destabilization of the self? Would it encourage a return to toward the orthodoxies of the past or, alternatively, lead to a continuing embrace of a forward-looking ethos?

The Acquisitive Impulse

In Rosemary’s Baby, these debates over the role of religion and commodification are represented by the Woodhouses. On the one side stands Guy Woodhouse, aligned with acquisitiveness and commercial gain, whilst Rosemary stands on the other as she deals on a conscious and unconscious level with a crisis of loss: that of family and of faith. From the moment Guy is introduced, he is seen as being a chameleon, acquiring a new identity at will. As the young couple view what will become their new, hip, urbanite, New York City apartment, a conversation ensues between the building manager and the Woodhouses:

Mr. Nicklas (building superintendent) to Guy:
Are you a doctor?
Guy: Yes
Rosemary: He’s an actor
Nicklas: What, acting … we’re very popular with actors. Have I … er, seen you in anything?
Guy: Well, let’s see - I did Hamlet a while back, didn’t I Liz? And then we did the … the … The Sandpiper
Rosemary: He’s joking. He was in Luther and Nobody Loves an Albatross, and a lot of television plays and commercials.

In this way, Guy’s sense of self might be defined as fluid. Indeed, not only does he not deny the misconception that he is a doctor, but he also later pretends to be Burt Lancaster. Indeed, both his on and off-screen/stage personas are consumed with the assumption of roles to further his career and ensure financial success. Many might regard the profession of acting, especially on the New York stage, to be an artistic pursuit, however, as the film progresses, it

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is revealed that Guy’s primary desire is to become rich and famous, a motivation that increasingly consumes him. It is this weakness that is manipulated and taken advantage of by the Casteveets. As the conversation continues:

Nicklas: Well that’s where the money is, isn’t it, commercials?
Guy: [laughing agreement] and the artistic thrill too.

Although the comment is, admittedly, tongue-in-cheek, it is later revealed that it is through these commercials, and not more high-art endeavours, that the Woodhouses have managed to prosper. According to the 1967 novel by Ira Levin from which Polanski adapted his film, “In 1964, Guy had done a series of Anacin commercials that, shown time and time again, had earned him eighteen thousand dollars and was still producing a sizable income.”8 This selfsame success is equally revealed in the film, as Guy’s Yamaha advert is portrayed on the television screen. When comparing the novel to its adaptation, it is the ways in which the original is modified that are particularly noteworthy; a Yamaha motorcycle advertised as “swingin”, when compared with a pain-killing pharmaceutical such as Anacin, indeed seems a merely luxurious purchase.

Another deviation between the novel and its adaptation, equally relevant here, occurs in the meeting place for Rosemary and her close friend and mentor Edward Hutchens (‘Hutch’), played in the film by Maurice Evans. In the novel, the agreed location is the Seagram Building, whereas in the film, the Time-Life Building is suggested. Although Seagram’s Gin is, admittedly, a commercial product, it could be argued that Time-Life magazines, like House Beautiful, are even more associated with issues of commercialism, self-definition, and modernity. This is because these publications serve not only as products to be bought and sold, but also function as key vehicles for the dissemination of middle-class values. Indeed, it is the middle class that is most affected by consumerism as self-definition, because this group does not occupy nepotistic positions of power, nor is it chiefly concerned with subsistence, as are the less fortunate classes. Time magazine, according to Bell, became a virtual Bible for the disenfranchised middle-class. He argues that publisher Henry Luce’s genius “was to take the traditional American values, the belief in God, in work, in achievement, and to translate these, through the idiom of the coming urban civilization into the creed of American destiny (‘the American century’) on a world scale.”9

Reporting on and interpreting issues such as these, Luce’s magazines Time, Life, Sports Illustrated, and Fortune influenced a huge demographic. Through manipulating traditional rhetoric and applying it to a consumer culture, Luce effectively sold a lifestyle that Rosemary and other up-and-coming housewives like her desperately wanted for themselves and for their families. Equally, this reference to Time foreshadows certain religious debates which, like these consumerist concerns, will come to dominate the film. This connection is made more explicit in the original novel in a discussion of a controversial issue of Time.

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9 Bell, The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism, p. 76.
The edition in question features a black background upon which is emblazoned the bold title “Is God Dead?”. A character comments upon one of the articles included: “His name is Altizer and he’s down in – Atlanta, I think; and what he says is that the death of God is a specific historic event that happened right now, in our time. That God literally died.”. This issue of the magazine is also featured in the film as Rosemary picks up a copy at her obstetrician’s office, a man later revealed to be a member of the Castevet coven. As the publication is foregrounded, so too are debates with regard to traditionalism versus modernity revealed. The secularization of religion is also referenced when Guy, watching television coverage of the Pope’s visit, sees the broadcast in purely commercial terms: “It’s the Pope at Yankee Stadium. Christ what a mob … that’s a great spot for my Yamaha commercial”. It would appear that faith, organized religion, and all its associated symbols have, at least for Guy Woodhouse, become just another opportunity for media hype. Further, traditionalism has equally become just another commodity whose innate worth is reduced to its ability to be bought or sold.

Indeed, media influence comes to dominate many choices made by this couple. Guy makes wardrobe choices with the assistance of advertisements in The New Yorker, while Rosemary takes clippings from House Beautiful for ideas in decorating, and supports her unpopular decision to get her hair cut from top stylist Vidal Sassoon with the justification that it is advertised as being very “in”. This element provides both a diegetic link to commercial concerns and an extra-diegetic pointer to the film’s production. Polanski recalls: “When I suggested that Vidal Sassoon himself should come to Hollywood to cut Mia’s hair, Bill Castle [the film’s producer] decided to hype the occasion into a spectacular ‘photo opportunity’ for the Hollywood press […] Throughout, like the true hippie she was, Mia kept up a verbal assault on the press for covering such a minor function instead of applying their investigative energies to the plight of deprived and underprivileged American Indians.” This connection between commodification and identification is often overlooked within academic analyses of this film. Mark Jancovich suggests that “Unlike the film, the novel is saturated with references to the media and media events. It presents a social world in which the population is constantly being […] told what to think and how to behave.” While the novel does indeed present these issues of media influence, the film does so as well and perhaps to an even greater extent. This is evidenced not only by the foregrounding of a concern with consumerism, but additionally when it comes to discussions of identification and identificatory mechanisms.

To begin with, the families of both Guy and Rosemary are in a state of rupture, which is first alluded to, if not directly stated in the film, by Rosemary who discusses her large extended family with Minnie. Whereas she confesses to having three brothers, two sisters

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10 Levin, p. 146.
and sixteen nieces and nephews, this large and potentially supportive network neither contacts Rosemary nor is engaged when the protagonist is in a state of crisis. When she first visits Rosemary, Minnie notes that the only mail she has received are ads, as opposed to any familial correspondence. Later in the film, when Rosemary is in a state of crisis, suspecting all around her of being in collusion to steal her unborn infant, it is her former obstetrician and then her friend to whom she turns rather than to any family member. Guy’s family is even more absent, being completely omitted from the film’s narrative altogether. Indeed, it is this lack of familial ties that appears to be endemic to all the young people in the film. Even Theresa Gionoffrio, the first woman to be chosen by the Castevets to become the mother of the Anti-Christ, lacks any generational connectivity, only admitting, dismissively, to having a brother in the Navy.

**Loss, Desire, and the Dream**

While the family is a structuring absence in the film, in the novel this lack is more directly addressed. Of her role in the family, the novel tells us that: “She was the youngest of six children, the other five of whom had married early and made homes close to their parents; behind her in Omaha she had left an angry, suspicious father, a silent mother, and four resenting brothers and sisters [...] In New York Rosemary felt guilty and selfish”.¹³ This rupture increased with Rosemary’s marriage to Guy. As she and her husband began to set up house, she found that she had no one to turn to, to share in her joy. The novel tells us: “They were all hostile now [...] not forgiving her for (a) marrying a Protestant, (b) marrying in only a civil ceremony, and (c) having a mother-in-law who had two divorces and was married now to a Jew up in Canada.”¹⁴ In the novel, Guy is on equally shaky ground when it comes to familial ties. Levin explains that not only did Guy change his birth-name, but that he also never knew the father who gave it to him. This isolation, as the book suggests, creates a longing in Guy that is satisfied, ironically, by none other than the Castevets. As Rosemary observes: “She saw that Minnie and Roman had become deeply important to him. It wasn’t surprising; his mother was a busy self-involved chatterer and none of his fathers had been truly fatherly. The Castevets were filing a need in him, a need of which he himself was probably unaware.”¹⁵

Whereas Guy is associated with commercialism, and thus what can be gained and acquired over all else, Rosemary sits on the other side of this essential dichotomy in being defined not by what she has but what she has lost, not only in terms of her family, but also in terms of her faith. During a dinner party hosted by Minnie, religion becomes a topic:

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Roman: No Pope ever visits a city where the newspapers are on strike.
Minnie: I heard he’s going to postpone and wait till it’s all over.
Guy: Well, that’s showbiz.
Roman: That’s exactly what it is. All the costumes, the rituals, all religions ...
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¹⁴ Levin, p. 23.
¹⁵ Levin, p. 99.
Minnie: Oh, oh, I think we’re offending Rosemary.
Rosemary: No ... no ...
Castevet: You’re not religious, my dear, are you?
Rosemary: Well I ... I was brought up a Catholic, now I don’t know...
Minnie: You looked uncomfortable.
Rosemary: Well, he is the Pope.
Roman: You don’t need to have respect for him just because he pretends that he is holy.
Minnie: When I think what they spend on robes and jewels.

This exchange is indeed interesting not only because of its foregrounding debates around consumerism, but also because it reveals the concerns that Rosemary has about her faith. The Catholic guilt that Rosemary experiences is, perhaps, only alluded to in the film, but it is discussed overtly in the novel. It has been suggested that Levin “proceeds to create suspense by operating on the theory that a little Catholic guilt can go a long way”. This existential crisis is exhibited in the novel on both a conscious and an unconscious level, as Rosemary directly discusses her loss of faith and also engages in more involuntary actions like crossing herself in times of stress. Even though not made manifest, the lack or loss that Rosemary experiences is nonetheless addressed in the film at an unconscious level through dreams and the symbols featured in them.

The first of these dream sequences appears to resonate, in riddling fashion, with Rosemary’s childhood. Following the couple’s return from the scene of Terry’s suicide, Rosemary lies awake, struggling to sleep. The dream, occupying just about a minute of screen-time, begins with a further shot of Terry in a pool of her own blood. The dream shifts to a large hall in which a nun is speaking in Minnie’s voice, haranguing the camera and, it seems, a second nun standing by a group of schoolgirls. Pointing to scaffolding on which a pair of workmen are bricking up large arched windows, and refusing to be shushed by a male figure speaking in her husband’s voice, she concludes: “If you listened to me, we wouldn’t have to do this ... We’d be all set to go now instead of having to start from scratch ... I told you not to tell her anything in advance. I told you she wouldn’t be open-minded.” We return to Rosemary, who comments guiltily: “I told Sister Veronica about the windows and she withdrew the school from the competition, otherwise ...”.

The second, longer dream, occupying almost six-and-a-half minutes of screen-time, dramatises the rape of Rosemary, a veritable nightmare in which again the distinction between fantasy and reality is fundamentally blurred. It takes place following the couple’s

17 Polanski’s screenplay intended the venue to be a composite of “Our Lady’s School, Uncle Mike’s Body Shop and the candy counter in the Orpheum Cinema”, but only the first of these appears to be invoked in the film itself. In the film the characters in this dream bear no names, but in the screenplay they are referred to as ‘Sister Agnes’, ‘Sister Veronica’, and ‘Uncle Mike’. See the ‘Final Draft’ of the screenplay, dated 24 July 1967, at www.sellingyourscreenplay.com/wp-content/uploads/screenplay/scripts/Rosemarys-Baby.pdf, especially pp. 29-30 (first dream) and pp. 65-69 (second dream).
decision to start a baby when Guy becomes aware of his selfish commitment to his own career. The shots which make up this complex and extensive sequence are marked by shifting points-of-view and complex spatial transitions, and the soundtrack features strong acoustic variations between a ticking clock, vocal echo, tense orchestral music, chanting, and high-pitched choral singing. The episode starts when Rosemary becomes dizzy after a meal to which Minnie has contributed portions of chocolate mousse which tastes strange to Rosemary. When she collapses, Guy carries her to bed; she needs sleep, but she wants to make a baby. In her dream, Rosemary first finds herself lying on a mattress in her dressing gown on a calm sea within sight of land, then as guest at a drinks party on a yacht in an unknown harbour, with the skipper turning into Hutch and back again as the scene proceeds.

Guy undresses Rosemary, who shields her naked torso only to find herself in a bikini amongst other female sunbathers on the deck of the yacht, with the captain standing by. When she sees Hutch on the quayside, his arms full of what might be rolled-up charts, and asks if he is not coming with them, the captain explains, speaking as though in an echo chamber: “Catholics only. I wish we weren’t bound by these prejudices. But unfortunately…” A hand is seen removing a wedding ring from another hand; Rosemary is now lying on scaffolding, with the camera roving along a version of the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. We return to Hutch, waving a flag and warning of a typhoon which has killed 55 people in London. On the deck of a ship in a heavy sea at night, Rosemary approaches a white-uniformed sailor at the wheel – revealed as the lift operator from the Bramford – who urges her to go below. As she obeys him, she is seen to be naked. She enters a dark interior space, ignoring, to her right, the blazing window-like apertures of a structure something like a building. She lies back on a mattress. A naked group at the far end includes Minnie, Roman, and Laura-Louise.

Roman begins to paint red lines and symbols on her naked body as the others chant. Guy tells Minnie: “She’s awake, she sees!”, to which Minnie urgently responds: “She don’t see. As long as she ate the mouse [Minnie’s pronunciation of the word ‘mousse’, over which Rosemary and Guy laughed at dinner] she can’t see nor hear. She’s like dead. Now sing!” A woman in a flowing dress – described in the screenplay as “a lady”, but with a striking facial resemblance to Jacqueline Kennedy – descends a stairway, says she is sorry that Rosemary is unwell, and offers to have the “music” stopped; Rosemary says her illness is only the result of a mouse-bite, and not to change the “programme”. The ‘lady’ recommends that Rosemary have her legs tied down in case of “convulsions”, a task which is performed by men in white jackets.

Seen from Rosemary’s point-of-view, a naked Guy approaches; his face becomes scabbed, and the hands that run over Rosemary’s body change from human to scaly. The bed-sheets are now black and silky. Rosemary is both pleased and then terrified as, amidst superimpositions of smoke, a bestial face approaches: “This is no dream – this is really happening!” cries Rosemary. A papal figure approaches in the darkness and commiserates:
‘Pope’: They tell me you have been bitten by a mouse.
Rosemary: Yes. That’s why I couldn’t come to see you.
‘Pope’: Oh that’s all right. We wouldn’t want you to jeopardise your health.
Rosemary: Am I forgiven father?
‘Pope’: Oh, absolutely.

He puts forward his ring into a big close-up. It is the amulet worn by Terry and passed on to Rosemary by Minnie Castevet. The next morning, Guy admits that his “ragged nails” are responsible for the scratches on Rosemary’s body, jovially admitting that he went ahead and made love to Rosemary although she was comatose: “I didn’t want to miss baby night [...] it was kind of fun in a necrophile sort of way”. Rosemary tells Guy; “I dreamed someone was raping me [...] someone inhuman”. “Thanks a lot” responds Guy.

These dreams/nightmares function in a number of ways. First, they give voice to the Catholic guilt that Rosemary experiences with regard to her break from the Church. She is now separated and isolated from her faith and spiritual community, being figuratively bricked off and withdrawn, as her first dream suggests. Also, her guilt manifests in her decision to stay at home rather than to visit the Pope as he comes to the city where she lives, a decision which she feels requires forgiveness. Additionally, these dreams give voice to a potential desire to re-connect with her abandoned religion, as she becomes part of a party of famous Catholics, accepted and not excluded, even as those around her who are not of the faith are rejected. Finally, these dreams might be seen as defence mechanisms, ways of coping with abhorrent conditions.

Her former Catholicism not only functions as a mechanism of unconscious loss and desire but is also arguably what leads the Castevets to choose Rosemary as the ideal candidate for their experiment designed to bring about the Anti-Christ. Whereas Terry, on learning that she was pregnant with the spawn of Satan, threw herself out of the window of the ‘Bramford’ apartment building, Rosemary, being a former Catholic, would not commit suicide, nor would she do anything to harm her child, both being mortal sins. Indeed, not only does she not kill herself and her unborn child, but comes to care for him, as is suggested at the end of the film. Finally, it is the symbol of Adam from the fresco in the Sistine Chapel that foretells the true nature of the infant that will soon be conceived as a result of the rape. As God breathes life into Adam, so too he offered his son, Christ, as a second Adam to repair the loss caused by original sin. The religious discourse surrounding the Castevet coven offers up a faith that in many ways functions as another sacramental religion complete with ritual, sacraments, and a second coming.

**Religion and the Lure of Traditionalism**

It is spiritual and communal affiliation that acts as a grounding for the apparent villains of the film (‘apparent’ because, many would argue, it is Guy himself who is the ultimate antagonist and villain). Just as Rosemary and Guy are portrayed as being respectively defined by what they have and what they have lost as opposed to who they are and where they come from,
the Castevets represent the antithesis of this personal crisis. In setting up this dichotomy, it should not be suggested that one side should be favoured over the other. Indeed, at the time of the film’s release, there existed complex debates around, on the one hand, the efficacy and necessity of traditionalism including familial allegiance, religious connectivity and generational imperatives, while on the other hand, the benefits of a more forward-focused, self-oriented ethos associated with modernity were equally questioned. To say that the Castevets are more stable does not make them ‘good’, just as to say that they are affiliated with a witches’ coven does not automatically make them ‘evil’.

Roman Castevet was born in the apartment in which he now resides and is carrying on his father’s work in attempting to conjure the Devil. Minnie, his wife, is a devoted partner who aids him by taking care of his physical needs while also supporting his spirituality through offering advice and counsel as regards important decisions made by his coven. Surrounding the Castevets are Roman’s religious followers, members of his spiritual circle who unquestioningly support the couple and their mission, thus forming a connected and committed community. As Tony Williams has suggested, the Castevets are portrayed as being both spiritually and historically connected. Here, Satanism represents “another older religious order, having its own religious rites alongside the Catholic ones. The Castevets represent the historical, knowing older thespians, practicing an ancient religion [...] Satanism and Catholicism are presented as equally conservative.”

Like Williams, Beverle Houston and Marsha Kinder discuss Rosemary’s Baby as articulating an analogous relationship between Satanism and Christianity: “The story takes the traditional Christ myth and dresses it in its equally traditional Satanic disguise [...] with the divine figure as father of the child, Rosemary as the chosen vessel, the starting of the new era with the birth of the messiah, and the adoration of the child.” The connection between Satanism and Catholicism is a key trope throughout the film. (The Castevets worship Satan and desire to bring about the birth of the Anti-Christ, but they are never actually referred to as being Satanists. They are consistently regarded as witches and their community as a coven. This is symptomatic of the film’s production in an era when Satanism and witchcraft were regarded as synonymous). This feeds into the debate over the efficacy of religious belief versus an isolating secularism. The Castevets, because they do not exist in isolation, and have the benefit of faith and faith community to support their cause, manage to get what they want.

The link between the holy ring of the Pope and the holy amulet of the Castevet coven, and the Devil’s assumption of corporeal form to procreate with a mortal woman, suggest obvious parallels between Catholicism and Satanism. Rosemary conceives the Anti-Christ in a non-consensual version of the Immaculate Conception, whilst the child’s birth takes place

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in a communal setting surrounded by gift-bearing travellers who have conducted a pilgrimage to witness the new-born saviour, a scene similar to the Biblical depiction of the gifts of the magi. Kinder and Houston suggest a still broader symbolism: “In the extraordinarily powerful scene where Rosemary conceives the son of Satan, there is a merging of images from at least three mythologies: Satan and the witches from the demonic, the Pope and Michelangelo’s creation of Adam from traditional Christianity, and the Kennedyesque yachting captain from the modern myth of power.”

The allusion to the Kennedys in the second dream acts in a similar way, foregrounding the importance of faith to culture. Indeed, not only was Kennedy famously the first Catholic President of the United States, and both his campaign and his dissenters were concerned with his spiritual affiliation above most other issues, but once elected, he continued to point to the importance of religious affiliation. In his Inaugural Address of 20 January 1961, for example, Kennedy makes manifest his beliefs: “We observe today not a victory of a party, but a celebration of freedom – symbolizing an end, as well as a beginning – signifying renewal, as well as change … The world is very different now. For man holds in his mortal hands the power to abolish all forms of human poverty in all forms of human life. With a good conscience our only sure reward, with history the final judge of our deeds, let us go forth to lead the land we love, asking His blessing and His help, but knowing that here on earth God’s work must truly be our own.”

The President insisted that Americans begin to realize the potential that was inherited from the revolutionary war, suggesting that they look to the past to secure the future of the country. Finally, by invoking the Creator, Kennedy seemed to evince not only a social and political imperative, but a moral one as well, a belief that was rooted in religion as much as in historical nationalism. Indeed, these values are lost on the protagonists of Rosemary’s Baby. They are groundless, and alone without tradition, historical connectivity or faith to guide them. This representation has been alluded to, though not thoroughly analysed, by authors such as Carol Clover and Mark Jancovich. Contrasting “White Science” and “Black Magic” in her discussion of the horror film of the 1960s and 1970s, Clover suggests of their religious themes that the latter “refers to Satanism, voodoo, spiritualism, and folk variants of Roman Catholicism. A world of crosses, holy water, séances, candles, prayer, exorcism, strings of garlic, beheaded chickens, and the like […]”

Although Williams, Clover, and Jancovich allude to the conservative nature of Satanism as it is presented in the mid-1960s and 1970s horror film generally, and in Rosemary’s Baby in particular, they do not go into much detail with regard to why this might be so. This is 20 Kinder and Houston, Close-Up, p. 19.
because, for these authors specifically, as for the overall academic discourse concerning this time-period and the horror texts it produced, a religious thematic does not serve as a primary concern, even though in this period the efficacy of traditional spiritual affiliation was under heated debate within the United States. Indeed, rather than simply being an example of a repressive institution rejected by the modernist ethos – a theory espoused by not only Williams, Clover and Jancovich, but equally by commentators such as Robin Wood, Vivian Sobchack and Barbara Creed – it is specifically congregational religion, represented in the unlikely guise of a witches’ coven, that is instead defined as the chief grounding mechanism for the Castevets. Thus, while the loss of religion (in the form of a more traditional faith like Catholicism) results in the isolation and unhinging of the protagonist it is the affiliation to a religious orthodoxy that allows for the stabilisation of the individual, in this case the Castevets, a grounding that is strong enough to potentially take over the world.

**The Gothic and the Demonic**

Contemporary cultural debates about the efficacy of traditionalism versus modernity played out as a dichotomy between self-definition and consumerism on the one hand, and religious and familial connectivity on the other, thus form the central conflict in *Rosemary’s Baby*. Indeed, when analysing the reception of the film, it is specifically the configuration of faith communities that appears to make the film particularly controversial. Following the film’s release, *The New York Times* reported that the film’s condemnation by the National Catholic Office of Motion Pictures (formerly the National League of Decency) was a result of the way in which traditional Christianity was depicted and aligned with Satanism: “Much more serious [than the scenes of nudity] is the perverted use that the film makes of fundamental Christian beliefs surrounding the birth of Christ and its mockery of religious persons and practices.” The aesthetic value of the film seemed to pose an additional threat, as the National Catholic Office went on to suggest: “The very technical excellence of the film serves to intensify its defamatory nature. They [the National Catholic Office] feel that if the film becomes a big money maker it will mean a further decline in the influence of the group.” The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, meanwhile, gave the film an ‘O’ (for ‘morally offensive’): “the production values are topnotch and performances completely chilling, but the movie’s inverted Christian elements denigrate religious beliefs.”

The allegedly sacrilegious nature of the film may thus rest on its blurring of the traditional dichotomy between ‘good’ and ‘evil’, on the fact that there is no one truly on the side of the angels and thus equipped to do battle with their nefarious adversaries, and on its depiction of the very issue of ‘faith’ itself. This is a common trope of most horror films of the later 1960s and the following decade. To name but a few, films such as Thompson’s *Eye of the Devil* (UK, 1967), Russell’s *The Devils* (UK, 1971), Romero’s *Season of the Witch* (USA, 1972), Fredkin’s

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The Exorcist (USA, 1973), Hardy’s The Wicker Man (UK, 1973), Fuest’s The Devil’s Rain (Mex/USA, 1975), Donner’s The Omen (UK/USA, 1976), and Rosenberg’s The Amityville Horror (USA, 1979), all seem to share a similar concern with the struggle between faith and a lack thereof, whilst upholding a concern with the importance of belief above all else as being efficacious. Where this faith community’s relationship to the outside world is concerned, suggests the book which the dying Hutch leaves as a warning for Rosemary, “The stubborn fact remains that whether or not we believe, they most assuredly do.”

The absence of belief, for its part, seems to typify the contemporary condition in which the protagonists find themselves. For Bell this increased popularisation of secularism and atheism within modern culture will lead to a future in which religion will inevitably be re-incorporated. What is interesting in Rosemary’s Baby, allowing for the modern condition of disbelief, is that the sacred is in fact briefly recovered in the form of a reference to Pope Paul VI’s October 1965 visit to New York, with the city flocking to attend a Votive Mass at Yankee Stadium – TV coverage of which, however, appears to impress Guy largely for its commercial possibilities.

Even though many textual indicators – location, and the establishment of textual protagonist and antagonist – seem to suggest the foregrounding of a modernist agenda, the ending, as well as the thematic concern with the efficacy of organised religion, further complicates the text’s ambiguous relationship to these contemporary debates. If it could be argued that Polanski’s work reveals “The terrors of everyday life, which prise apart the bland surfaces of common interaction to disclose the anxieties and aggressions which lie beneath”, then this concern is one that is not only thematically but also visually reinforced, through the aesthetic connection between Rosemary’s Baby and the Gothic. In an early scene in the film, described earlier, a tracking shot follows the Woodhouses when they view the ‘Bramford’ for the first time. Although this shot establishes them as being the protagonists by following their every move, the camera pauses with Guy as he looks at a man appearing to drill a peephole in the door to one of the apartments. This moment could be read in a number of ways. First, it could be seen as foregrounding the notion that the spectator needs to look deeper and beyond the surface, that all is not what it seems. Additionally, this scene could be regarded as foregrounding the way in which the interiors of Rosemary’s Baby will increasingly dominate as the labyrinthine ‘Bramford’ becomes a central ‘character’ of the film.

Indeed, from the very opening title sequence of the film, the iconic Gothic edifice of the ‘Bramford’ begs to be considered as an important ‘character’. By contrast with iconic modern structures like the Empire State and Chrysler Buildings, the ‘Bramford’ is old, antiquated, and falling apart. It is not angular and linear, but instead overly decorous, rococo, and replete with long winding corridors, mazes and hidden corridors that confuse, isolate, and entrap, a locus for supernatural occurrences and the macabre. The exteriors of the ‘Bramford’ were filmed at New York’s Dakota apartment building, where John Lennon was

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26 Punter, The Literature of Terror, p. 347.
shot dead in 1980. Although not of the Gothic revival period per se, its steep sloping roofs and decorative tracery were inspired by the movement and its popular vernacular during the mid-19th Century, when the building was constructed. The house is, as Punter suggests, much like a Gothic castle in its emphasis on mystery and terror: “A common insistence on archaic settings, a prominent use of the supernatural... Gothic fiction is the fiction of the haunted castle, of heroines preyed upon by unspeakable terrors.”27 Hutch is not keen on “black Bramford”, advising Guy and Rosemary of its “unpleasant reputation turn of the century”, and reminding them of notorious former residents such as Pearl Ames, Keith Kennedy, the Trench sisters – “proper Victorian ladies” who cooked and ate several young children, including a niece. Adrian Mercato, who practised witchcraft, conjured up the Devil, and was attacked by fellow residents for his pains, is eventually revealed to be the father of Roman Castevet. “In ‘59”, reports Hutch, “a dead infant was found, wrapped in newspaper, in the basement”.

As in most Gothic narratives, the internal world is one that is dangerous, steeped in the supernatural, a world in which the unspeakable is actualized. Indeed, while Guy exists in the public sphere of entertainment and commerce, Rosemary, while somewhat affected by the external world of the media, is nonetheless increasingly relegated to interior spaces, much like her Gothic predecessors, and thus slowly driven to the brink of madness. These fears are portrayed on the surface as having a ‘scientific’ basis, as the product of a woman under the influence of what is, says Guy, following Dr. Sapirstein, “Prepartum – I don’t know – some kind of hysteria”. The narrative does, in fact, follow Rosemary in her actions and thoughts, unlike any of the other characters, and information is only revealed as she is made aware of it. We are thus left to wonder whether she is truly under threat from the Castevet coven, or simply prey to deluded fantasies. In fact, this seems to be the most common of academic readings of the film. Authors such as Lucy Fisher and Virginia Wright Wexman approach it from a feminist perspective that focuses on the victimization and rape of Rosemary, even as others, such as Mark Jancovich, Robin Wood, and Carol Clover, suggest that, like so many from the period, the film is the product of an overarching concern with heteronormative, phallocentric patriarchy.

Equally, there is a constant questioning of appearances: the attractive husband with ugly intentions, a grandfatherly neighbour at the head of a witches’ coven, the kindly and well-respected obstetrician in league with Satan. Nothing is, in fact as it seems, and thus the visual symbol of the peep-hole calls for a deeper look beyond the rational world of the obvious into a realm where superstition and the supernatural abound, all housed within the architecture of the Gothic. Here, it could be argued, the supernatural is real, and those who believe gain strength, even while those who doubt are thus weakened by their denial of this possibility and are destined to succumb to its will. Even while isolated aesthetically, however, the thematic concerns of the Gothic can be seen to be directly commenting upon its socio-political milieu, a point made by Punter when he suggests that the Gothic arose in a climate

that saw a shift in cultural values toward the rational, the scientific, and where in an attempt to “eschew the contemporary world”, the Gothic became defined as privileging the primitive: “The Gothic was the archaic, the pagan, that which was prior to or was opposed to, or resisted the establishment of civilised values and a well-regarded society.”28

The movement away from faith, however, as Punter also points out, not only increased a focus on the individuated self, thus adding to the debate over the place of religion in relationship to the hedonism of commodification. Another characteristic of post-Enlightenment secularisation, as Punter suggests, was the favouring of the rational over the supernatural. However, this has a secondary problematic consequence, for while science seeks to answer questions as to how the world functions, it cannot address the question as to why. For Punter, the fear that is exhibited in the Gothic results from the attempt to bring the rational to bear in relation to all aspects of social and political life: “To consider the passions and the emotions as mere subject faculties to be brought under the sway of an all-dominant reason, as the Enlightenment thinkers did, will render those faculties all the more incomprehensible.”29

This exclusion is not reducible to passions and emotions, however, but to spiritual beliefs as well. Indeed, Noel Carroll, like Punter, supports the notion that the Enlightenment, or the Age of Reason, was in fact in direct opposition to religious faith, which presumes a belief in or at least an acceptance of the supernatural. As Carroll suggests, “Reason was elevated as the major faculty and whatever hindered its flourishing was denounced. Religion was a special object of distrust because it valued faith and revelation over reason.”30 If, as Punter suggests, the Gothic was an attack on the privileging of the rational by means of the occult and the supernatural, then a new wave of Gothic began to emerge two hundred years later, at the end of the era of modernity, in response to another paradigm involving the nature of, and affiliation with, spiritual belief systems.

Andrew Tudor argues that the 1970s represents a boom period for the supernatural horror film, especially in relation to religion, a concern shared by Punter: “It is of course thoroughly understandable that alongside the development of the ‘traditional’ horror film there should have arisen a genre more designed to cope with specifically contemporary perceptions of terror: what is harder to understand is that in the 1970s both of these forms appear to have been temporarily supplanted at least in terms of commercial success by a third form, which returns to the age-old themes of Satanism and possession […] The first important exponent of the form was Roman Polanski himself in ‘Rosemary’s Baby’, but a more typical example is ‘The Exorcist’ (1973), directed by William Friedkin from a book by W.P. Blatty.”31

29 Punter, p. 27.
However, such a concern may not represent a third form, but instead, to a certain extent, a shared thematic and formal sensibility reminiscent of the Gothic tradition, and equally suggestive of the integral relationship between religion and the horror film of the Sixties and Seventies.

Conclusions

*Rosemary’s Baby* presents a thematic and aesthetic concern that offers up a dichotomy between more traditional, historical imperatives such as congregational spirituality and familial legacy, and the forward-looking, individualistic foci of modernity. Thus, in many ways the film provides a locus for the essential debates of the era with regard to what will come next – a return of the traditions of the past, or a furthering of the concerns with a heterodox future-focused agenda that may be aligned with modernity. I have suggested that these debates are addressed not only through the thematic conflict presented by protagonists and antagonists themselves, but also in the way in which these conflicts are presented aesthetically in terms of form. Indeed, this textual constellation has at once been linked both to the Gothic in its creation of labyrinthine interior spaces in which chaotic supernatural elements abound, and to modernity through its presentation of the exterior universe of New York City.

Thus, like the aesthetics and the thematic, *Rosemary’s Baby*, may be seen to span the new and the old, the traditional and the contemporary. Indeed, religion and religious discourses and debates thus not only form an essential element in understanding the thematic concerns of the film, but also the culture from which it arose. This is revealed not only in the text itself through representations of the efficacy of spiritual affiliation, but also in the way that the film was received as a socio-cultural threat, specifically with regard to these concerns. Significantly, it is informed by and interrogates the intellectual debates of the late 1960s and 1970s over the role of commodification in the building of a stable self-agency, and the ways in which a return to traditionalism – even, ironically, in the unlikely guise of a witches’ coven – could, as problematic as this may seem, provide a certain kind of solution.
Cowboy Gothic: 
Haunting and Memorialization in *High Plains Drifter*

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“Why do the dead return?” asks Slavoj Žižek. “The answer offered by Lacan is the same as that found in popular culture: because they were not properly buried [...] The return of the dead is a sign of a disturbance in the symbolic rite [...] This is the basic lesson drawn by Lacan from ‘Antigone’ and ‘Hamlet’.”

The theme of disturbed or improper burial producing restless spirits is a very old one. Around 100 A.D., Pliny the Younger related the story of a haunted house in Athens, which is only resolved once a body is discovered and properly buried. This narrative is reinforced a thousand different times in a thousand different ways: our most basic duty as civilized humans is to mourn and memorialize the dead, and if we fail to do so, the boundaries of civilization and savagery, past and present, and life and death begin to break down. *High Plains Drifter* (1973), Clint Eastwood’s first self-directed Western, places a similar sentiment in the mouth of Sarah Belding (Verna Bloom): “They say that the dead don’t rest without a marker of some kind.”

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2 Žižek, p. 183.
Sarah is speaking of the murdered marshal of the town of Lago, Jim Duncan, who lies in an unmarked grave in the town cemetery; Sarah was one of the few people who tried to intervene to prevent his unjust and violent death, horsewhipped in the center of the town, and will thus be one of the few spared its reckoning and conflagration. Duncan, we later learn, uncovered the fact that a local mine that has enriched the town actually lay on government property and was thus illegal. He was killed to keep this information secret. The townsfolk go about their daily lives, laboring under a collective curse, which is resolved through the violent actions of a gunfighter known only as ‘The Stranger’ (Eastwood). The fact that Lago is corrupt, cowardly and cursed famously drew the ire of John Wayne³, and places the film squarely within the cycle of revisionist Westerns in the late 1960s and early 1970s.⁴ For Teresa A. Goddu, the American Gothic exists precisely to refute that narrative of innocence through its spectral reminders of a history of slavery and genocide⁵, and this essay explores how *High Plains Drifter* couples its genre revisionism to its supernatural themes, creating a ‘Cowboy Gothic’ narrative that deploys the trope of the disturbed burial as a challenge to the Western’s construction of New World innocence and purity.

**The Man with a Name**

*High Plains Drifter* begins in a way that should be immediately recognizable to anyone even remotely familiar with the genre: a stranger rides into town. Its first image is of a stock Western landscape, a barren southwestern American desert, our view distorted by waves of heat. A slow dissolve provides our first, distant image of a man on a horse riding towards the camera, apparently materializing from nothing. Dee Barton’s eerie score meanwhile uses synthesizers to approximate the sound of the theremin, for decades “*Hollywood’s signature instrument of the ‘otherworldly’*”⁶, creating a Gothic ambiance. We first see the town of Lago from a nearby hill as the Stranger draws nearer. Even from this distance, it already looks like a haphazard collection of buildings rather than a fully realized outpost of civilization. Further defamiliarizing the environment of the Western town is the fact that Lago sits on the edge of a vast lake—the film was shot on the banks of Mono Lake, a salt lake in California. Looking to escape the convention of a Monument Valley-style setting, Eastwood noted that “*Mono Lake has a weird look to it, a lot of strange colors – never looks the same twice during the day.*”⁷ The familiar yet strange setting helps defamiliarize the

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film’s use of recognizable Western iconographies. The camera tilts upwards and re-frames Lago more fully against the lake, emphasizing its smallness, as if it were in danger of being swallowed by the water. Eastwood’s title card, in the red of fire or blood, or the red paint that will become significant later in the film, appears against this image.

The film’s first image from within Lago looks outside, at the Stranger rides into town through its graveyard. The gravestones are wooden and plain, with names painted crudely on them; the graveyard itself seems overgrown and unmaintained. After the Stranger rides out of the frame, the camera draws our attention to the names on them through racking focus, a subtle detail that grows in significance once we learn of Jim Duncan’s unmarked grave. The next shot shows the Stranger riding past a similar wooden sign, this one bearing the town’s name. Later in the film, the Stranger applies red paint to the sign and renames the town ‘Hell’, echoing Duncan’s final curse: “Damn you all to Hell!”. More than just a stranger, Eastwood’s character is ‘The Stranger’, not so much an individual instance of a convention as its amplification into a walking archetype. The Stranger’s lack of a name is more thematically significant than in any of Sergio Leone’s Dollars trilogy. Though Eastwood’s character in the trilogy is known popularly as ‘The Man with No Name’, he had names, or at least nicknames, in all three of those films. And if the Leone character was implicitly superhuman and invincible, it becomes more literal with the Stranger, who casually avoids a near-point-blank gunshot early in the film and later seems capable of teleportation and other supernatural feats. So, who or what is the Stranger? Is he the Devil, or an Old Testament-style avenging angel? Is he the ghost of Marshall Duncan?

I offer no fresh insight if I comment that High Plains Drifter has supernatural implications. Vincent Canby’s contemporary review noted that High Plains Drifter is “part ghost story, part revenge Western”11, and numerous other scholars have explored it along those lines. According to Eastwood, the character was initially written as the marshal’s brother. But, Eastwood “took out references to the brother because I felt that I wanted to present it as an apparition or a ghost. Maybe it’s a ghost – I let the audience decide.”12 It is possible to see the Stranger as a baroque amplification or even self-parody of Eastwood’s

27. For more on the significance of this location, see Mary Lea Bandy and Kevin Stoehr, Ride,Boldly Ride: The Evolution of the American Western, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012, pp. 244–46.
9 Eastwood would play a more unequivocally angelic dead gunfighter in Pale Rider (USA, 1985), which he also directed.
10 The name ‘Duncan’ echoes the king in Shakespeare’s Macbeth, whose murder triggers waves of disorder that are only corrected by his murderer’s death.
screen persona, especially as established in Leone’s trilogy (A Fistful of Dollars, For a Few Dollars More, and The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly (It/Sp/W. Germ, 1964, 1965, 1966): as William Beard notes, the earlier films’ “suggestion of the supernatural has become literally true... The heavily marked air of invincibility surrounding the Man With No Name here becomes the literal, actual invincibility of a supernatural being; the disdain of Leone’s character for the corrupt world becomes the implacable project of an avenging demigod.”13 There is no need to parse between the Stranger’s identities as a hyper-archetypical gunslinger, a ghost and an avenging angel; he is all at once.

Supernatural Westerns would seem to be innately odd beasts, in part because of the role death conventionally plays in the genre. Peter A. French writes: “The westerner is death-accepting ... He accepts a two-pronged conception of death. Death is inevitably for us all ... and it is the annihilation of the person. The only thing related or identifiable with the deceased that lives after his or her death are the memories the living have of the deceased, and those memories are framed in purely nonspiritual terms, in terms of the actions and the attitudes of the deceased while alive.”14 Certainly, churches are important locations in the Western, with prominent examples including the half-finished church in Ford’s My Darling Clementine (USA, 1946), which, stands in for the unfinished American project, and, in a revisionist mode, the neglected church in Altman’s McCabe & Mrs. Miller (USA, 1971). The church in Lago, probably in homage to High Noon, functions more as a town meeting venue than a place of worship. The genre as a whole contains very little discussion of a Christian afterlife: dead in the Western is dead.

Yet by the same token, burial grounds are hugely important in Westerns. Cemeteries both large (the sprawling graveyard of the final showdown in The Good, the Bad and the Ugly) and small (the intimate, rosy-hued graveyard in Ford’s She Wore a Yellow Ribbon, USA, 1949) and, smaller still, the family tombstones of Ford’s The Searchers, USA, 1956 and Eastwood’s Unforgiven, USA, 1992) play an important role in the genre’s iconography and mythology. In The Searchers, Mrs. Jorgensen (Olive Carey) asserts that “Someday this country’s gonna be a fine, good place to be. Maybe it needs our bones in the ground before that time can come.” She accepts that American nation-building will require generations of sacrifice and articulates how the colonization of the West requires ties of earth and bone to secure the legitimacy of white civilization. It is thus unsurprising that indigenous burial grounds figure more rarely, largely in revisionist works; one example is the Crow burial site in Pollock’s Jeremiah Johnson (USA, 1972) the transgression of which unleashes a cycle of furious interracial violence.15 In The Searchers, Ethan Edwards (John Wayne) mutilates the

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15 Indeed, it is in horror films that disturbed Native American burial grounds have traditionally figured, for example in Rosenberg’s The Amityville Horror (USA, 1979), Kubrick’s The Shining (UK/USA, 1980), Ray’s Scalps
freshly unearthed corpse of a Comanche warrior, shooting out his eyes so that he cannot enter the spirit land, but is obliged “to wander forever between the winds” – a ghostly fate that anticipates Edwards’s own final inability to rejoin the society he has fought to protect.

Graveyards in Westerns often serve as memento mori (along with the stock figure of the black-clad undertaker) and as reassuring evidence of white civilization’s inexorable presence; it is certainly more than happenstance that so many significant Westerns take place in the real-life town of Tombstone, Arizona (with its famous ‘Boot Hill’), since tombstones and Western towns serve a similar iconographic function as emblems of the fragile yet growing frontier society. Yet all the same, there is a tradition of ghostly returns from the dead in Western media. One could look to the more overt Western-horror hybrids – including films like Dein’s Curse of the Undead (USA, 1959) and McCarthy’s Ghost Town (USA, 1988) or Pittman’s The Twilight Zone episode ‘The Grave’ (USA, 1961) – but also within the conventional confines of the Western genre.

While films like Hurst’s The Haunted Range (USA, 1926), James’ Tombstone Canyon (USA, 1932), Hill’s The Vanishing Riders (USA, 1935) and Newfield’s Wild Horse Phantom (USA, 1944) generally resolve by unveiling hoaxes, they suggest a certain naturalness to themes of hauntedness within the Western milieu. One familiar example is not a film but a song: ‘(Ghost) Riders in the Sky’, written in 1948 by Stan Jones and initially subtitled ‘A Cowboy Legend’. It has been recorded by artists as diverse as Johnny Cash, Elvis Presley, Tom Jones, Fred Penner, Judy Collins, Peggy Lee, R.E.M. and the Dixie Chicks, and tells the story of a lone rider encountering a herd of infernal cattle being rounded by a group of cowboys, apparently a Sisyphean fate for unspecified transgressions. The ghost riders admonish the observer to “change your ways today/or with us you will ride”. ‘(Ghost) Riders in the Sky’ became a standard in part because of its transposition of European ‘Wild Hunt’ imagery into the wide-open plains of the imaginary West, which blends with the trope of ghostly rootlessness, as High Plains Drifter also does so effectively.

Let us re-phrase the question from Žižek that opened this essay: why do the dead return in the Western? Writing in the context of the British Empire, Simon Hay notes a body of ghost stories where “the colonial landscape is populated with white ghosts (rather than indigenous ones), and the story thus provides a sense of legitimacy through history to imperial occupation”.

In High Plains Drifter, rather the opposite is true: ghostliness is invoked to construct white civilization itself as phantasmic and temporary. It thus materializes a subtext in the Western genre itself. The trope of the ‘ghost town’, left behind

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(USA, 1983), and Lambert’s Pet Sematary (USA, 1989). The ‘old Indian burial ground’ convention is also referenced but disavowed in Hooper’s Poltergeist (USA, 1982).

by depleted resources and failed industries, and with buildings standing as silent testimonials of the civilization that has been and gone, speaks of the fragility of white inhabitation in the West, the fear that it too may be as transient as the ‘vanishing’ Indigenous peoples themselves. Lago seems to lack children altogether and its sole married couple, the Beldings, are deeply unhappy, with Lewis Belding (Ted Hartley) ultimately being cuckolded and then killed. Furthermore, the fact that the town has a Spanish name (for ‘lake’) but few Spanish-speaking inhabitants suggests that another regime of colonizers has come and gone, leaving barely any evidence except the tombstone-like town sign. And with the income from the local mine lost, Lago is likely to become a ghost town itself after the film ends.

**Blood and Fire**

Much has been written about the Stranger’s first actions in Lago, as he casually kills three men and then rapes Callie (Mariana Hill) as a punishment for questioning his manhood, an action that she seems to enjoy; later events imply that it was also part of the punishment meted on Lago itself, since Callie was among the townsfolk who passively allowed the murder of Duncan to occur. It is a deeply troubling sequence, one that Eastwood later admitted was probably unnecessary. Drucilla Cornell provocatively reads *High Plains Drifter* as “an allegory of how evil comes to be reproduced by the very failure of the perpetrators and bystanders to admit what they have done and seek reparation or forgiveness,” a dynamic in which the rape scene needs to be read as a traumatic act which is itself the consequence of trauma. Any reading of the Stranger’s masculine self-security is complicated if we also see him a brutalized, traumatized subject—both haunted and haunting. Indeed, the opening sequence also has a moment when the Stranger reacts to a horsewhip and briefly registers fear and panic.

Shortly after the rape, we see this traumatic haunting play out graphically, in a sequence dense with codes of the cinematic supernatural. We see the Stranger enter his hotel room. In a lengthy take, he adjusts the blinds, removes his hat, takes two slugs of whiskey and lowers himself back onto the bed. The camera slowly pushes in on his face until its horizontal length fills the frame. His eyes clap shut quickly, almost mechanically. While eerie electronic music reminiscent of the opening plays, the camera pushes into a close-up

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18 The Stranger forces the owner of the general store to give free supplies to a Native American family, the only indigenous characters in *High Plains Drifter*; the notion of a primal debt owed to the land’s original inhabitants is a definite but underdeveloped thread in the film.


of his face, over which another, barely recognizable face appears, superimposed. Is it a
dream? A memory? Before one image threatens to dissolve into the other, the other face
vanishes and we are left with the Stranger again. If he is sleeping, he is sleeping uneasily; his
mouth and eyes twitch. Once again, the other image appears superimposed over his face,
this time more clearly: a worn face covered with lines of blood.

In an unusual variation on the editing convention known as the graphic match, the
shape of the two men’s heads and their composition onscreen invites a connection between
them. Meanwhile, a new sound comes onto the soundtrack: the repeated cracking of a
whip. Once again, the superimposed image fades back to the Stranger, and he flinches in
time with the whip. The third time, however, the image of the bleeding man replaces the
Stranger altogether, not as a superimposition but as a more familiar dissolve. But soon after
it dissolves back to the Stranger, who once again flinches. On the sound of the whip, the film
cuts to images of what in retrospect becomes legible as the brutal death of Marshal Duncan,
including a number of point-of-view shots either of the whip-wielding assailants or the
indifferent bystanders. It is night-time and their faces are draped in shadow, and the
unearthly score adds to the unearthly, nightmarish feeling of the event. The scene
eventually dissolves from a point-of-view shot of whips flying towards the camera back to
the Stranger’s face. The composition, however, is now quite different, and the light in his
eyes cues us that it is now morning.

Between nightmare, hallucination and flashback, this sequence is redolent of those
theories of traumatic recall emphasizing “the inability on the part of the victim to distance
himself from the trauma, but only to suffer from it, through repeated reenactments
(flashbacks, nightmares, etc.) so literal that they cannot be described as recollection of the
event in question”. 21 These peculiar dissolves suggest another referent: the spirit
photograph, in which superimposition allows multiple sets of images, putatively those of the
living and the dead, to coexist on a single photographic surface. 22 It overturns linear
understandings of space and time by registering different multiple levels together 23, and its

21 Dorian Stuber, ‘Review of Trauma: A Genealogy’, Bryn Mawr Review of Comparative Literature, vol. 3 no. 2,
edu%2Fbmrcl%2Fvol3%2Fiss2%2F2&utm_medium=PDF&utm_campaign=PDFCoverPages.
22 For key sources on the spirit photograph, see Tom Gunning, ‘Phantom Images and Modern Manifestations:
Images: From Photography to Video, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2015, pp. 17–38; Martyn Jolly,
Faces of the Living Dead: The Belief in Spirit Photography, London: British Library, 2006; John Harvey,
Photography and Spirit, London: Reaktion Books, 2007; Louis Kaplan, The Strange Case of William Mumler,
Spirit Photographer, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008; Simone Natale, ‘A Short History of
23 I examine the quality of ‘co-registration’ common to spirit photographs and cinematic superimpositions in
Murray Leeder, The Modern Supernatural and the Beginnings of Cinema, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan,
2017; dissolves, such as those in High Plains Drifter, accomplish something similar. See also Claire Sisco King,
‘The Ideological Use of the Dissolve’, in Steffen Hantke, ed., Horror Film: Creating and Marketing Fear, Jackson,
invocation in *High Plains Drifter* helps us understand the film’s structures of haunting. The simultaneous presentation of the Stranger’s time and the marshal’s speaks to the intermingling of a traumatic past and a haunted present.

A nearly identical audiovisual strategy cues a different flashback to the beating death of Duncan later in the film. This time, the flashback is triggered by the impressions of Mordecai (Billy Curtis), the dwarf who becomes the Stranger’s staunchest ally in Lago, seemingly because he was a traumatized witness to the murder of Jim Duncan. After Mordecai dodges a punch from one of the cruel townsfolk, he takes cover under a walkway. The camera slowly zooms onto his face and the electronic hum and the sound of whips comes on to the soundtrack, and once again, the image dissolves to the face of the dying Marshal Duncan. We see that Mordecai was hiding in the same place when the killing occurred. The second flashback is slightly longer and more coherent than the first, and is harder to describe in an uncomplicated fashion as a memory of Mordecai’s, since it breaks away from his perspective altogether.

One might be inclined to say that the fact that the same audiovisual strategy accompanies a flashback of the seemingly un-supernatural Mordecai shows it to just be technique and muddies the film’s supernatural affinities in general. But one could also reasonably suggest, with Laurence F. Knapp, that “the dream is a collective memory-curse that will hover over the town until morality is restored and Duncan’s grave is properly marked.”24 This flashback ends with Mordecai’s face surrounded by darkness, the only one of the onlookers showing emotion at this brutal murder. (Presumably the reason that the Stranger immediately connects with Mordecai upon his arrival in town is because of the latter’s marginality and their shared trauma from Duncan’s murder.) The collective curse on the town is later visualized by the Stranger’s insistence on painting the entire town red: “especially the church!” he barks at the feckless preacher who was one of the silent mass who allowed Duncan’s murder to happen. Allan Cameron observes that in horror, the opposite is true: all red on the screen tends to suggest blood.25 The Stranger’s red paint job makes graphic the hidden stain on the town of Lago, the blood on the hands of virtually all—save for Mordecai and Sarah Belding, the only characters whom the Stranger treats with respect.

The Stranger’s post-coital conversation with Sarah contains the earlier-quoted dialogue about Duncan’s murder and his unmarked grave. The Stranger is evasive about whether he knows about Duncan and about his purpose in coming to Lago. She remarks “You’re a man who makes people afraid and that’s dangerous”, to which he replies “It’s

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25 Allan Cameron, ‘Colour, Embodiment and Dread in *High Tension* and *A Tale of Two Sisters*’, *Horror Studies*, vol. 3 no. 1, Spring 2012, p. 89.
26 Blood is prominent elsewhere in the film as the mining company man Morgan Allen (Jack Ging), wounded by the Stranger, leaves a trail of blood that the Stranger follows to the Bridges gang. On stabbing him to death, one of the gang members remarks on how much blood he had left in him.
what people know about themselves inside that make them afraid”, seemingly referencing the town’s unexpressed guilt. Immediately, the film cuts to Mordecai supervising the digging of fresh graves for the men the Stranger killed the night before. One of the townsfolk wonders whether they should mark the graves or not, and this scene ends with the revelation that the Stranger has renamed the town ‘HELL’ by defiling the town’s sign.

The last plague on Lago is one of fire. The Stranger is never more impressive than framed against the fire; it seems to be his home, his natural terrain, as he strikes suddenly and brutally against his killers. We are encouraged to see the Stranger as the purifying force that wipes away the corruption of Lago. Within the film’s intertextual generic web, it invokes Swickard’s classic Hell’s Hinges (1916), in which the wicked town of the film’s title is burned to the ground by the gunslinger Blaze Tracy (William S. Hart); at the end of the film, Blaze and his love Faith Henley (Clara Williams) retreat into the wilderness together, having sloughed off the corrupt values of the town in favor of a Western Eden. In light of its parallels with Hell’s Hinges, it is all the more striking that High Plains Drifter does not supply an ending that unites a heterosexual couple or promises a new, purer social contract, or even presents the wilderness as a hospitable alternative to the decadent town. Amid all the death, fire and carnage of its finale, the only signal of catharsis comes in the form of a single tombstone.

Rest in Peace?

Colin Davis writes that “The ghost’s appearance is the sign of a disturbance in the symbolic, moral or epistemological order. Once that disturbance has been corrected, the ghost will depart again, this time (all being well) for good. So the ghost returns in order to be sent away again.” To an extent this description would apply well to the ending of High Plains Drifter, where the Stranger departs, as many Western heroes do, when no longer needed. Simultaneously, Duncan’s corporeal remains lie in the ground, his tombstone attesting to his incorporation into nascent history of white civilization in the West. In his important structuralist treatment of the Western, Six-Guns and Society, Will Wright proposes a ‘Vengeance Variation’ to the genre’s ‘Classic Plot’, in which the narrative is driven more by the hero’s desire for vengeance than to safeguard white society (though, as in Ford’s Stagecoach [USA, 1939], one often indirectly accomplishes the other). High Plains Drifter fits the Vengeance Variation’s 13-point plot-line reasonably well, especially if you regard the Stranger as an incarnation of Duncan, who “is or was once a member of society” per Point 1. Wright’s formula ends with “The hero enters society”, which in order to apply to High Plains Drifter must describe the proper burial Duncan receives only after the villains are defeated.

Is Duncan indeed the protagonist of *High Plains Drifter*? The end sequence seems to disclose the truth about the Stranger’s nature. Riding out of the smoldering ruins of Lago, he passes by the bodies of the freshly dead lying in their caskets and then shares a meaningful look with Sarah Belding, who is preparing to leave town. The Stranger then rides out to the cemetery, where he finds Mordecai carving a new tombstone. For the second time, Mordecai raises the question of the Stranger’s name: “I never did know your name”, he says. The Stranger answers, “Yes, you do.” The camera tracks around to reveal the writing on the tombstone:

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MARSHAL
JIM DUNCAN
REST
IN PEACE
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It is briefly framed with the Stranger directly behind the stone, and the camera zooms closer until it dominates the screen. The natural sounds of the wind blowing are replaced by the eerie electronic drones of the film’s opening. These grow louder as, in an inversion of the opening sequence, we see the Stranger ride off, not into the sunset, but into thin air, vanishing into the mythic landscape of the West. Finally paralleled and contrasted are the forms of closure for Duncan (embodied) and the Stranger (disembodied), within the two key environments of the Western, civilization and the wilderness. Yet that very doubling complicates and muddies *High Plains Drifter’s* motion towards closure, as do its supernatural and Gothic affinities. Conspicuously, the film closes, with all the men directly responsible for Marshal Duncan’s murder themselves dead, though the issue over which he was killed remains unresolved: the fact that the mine, Lago’s principal source of income, lies on government land. Echoing Goddu’s construction of the Gothic as a challenge to New World innocence, its closure without catharsis reminds us the issue of ‘ownership’ of the West is far from settled, and may never truly be settled so long as the national crimes on which the settlement of the West was founded remain unresolved.

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Sound and Techno-Horror: *Kairo* and *Pulse*

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Over the last two decades the rising popularity of Japanese horror films and their impact on the international film market has been widely noted.\(^1\) Since the release of Nakata Hideo’s \(^2\) 1998 urban ghost film *Ringu*, a number of directors have adopted approaches that depict specifically Japanese cultural and ideological conceptions of the ghost. Nakata Hideo’s 1996 film *Joyūrei (Don’t Look Up/Ghost Actress)* can also be identified as a significant example of the renewed interest in Japanese cinematic representations of spirits. The collective term that has been associated with these films is *shinrei-mono eiga* (*ghost story films*).\(^3\) These films, in turn, have inspired a number of remakes worldwide. Notable interpretations include *The Ring* (Verbinski, USA, 2002), *The Grudge* (Takashi, USA/Jap, 2004), *Dark Water* (Salles, USA, 2005), and *One Missed Call* (Valette, USA/Jap/Germ/UK, 2008). These representations offer cinematic explorations of technophobia, social struggle, viral outbreaks in the digitised realm, and the distortion of biological/machinic distinctions.

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\(^2\) In this article Japanese names are written following Japanese custom, with surname (or family name) appearing first.

\(^3\) McRoy, *Nightmare Japan*, p. 75.
Writing of Kurosawa Kiyoshi’s *Kairo* (Jap, 2001), one of my case-studies in this article, Steve Jones notes that “the human self is not the only subject of infection here: the film form too suffers from Internet dial-up interference sound effects”. Jones points to the unsettling nature of the film’s use of sound, but offers only a brief account of how audio effects make a contribution to the film’s representation of spirits. In his book *Japanese Horror and the Transnational Cinema of Sensations*, Steven T. Brown addresses more questions about the role of sound in *Kairo* and specifically how sound flows modulate affect in Japanese horror cinema. Brown’s analysis addresses the important role sound plays in Kurosawa Kiyoshi’s horror films, “privileging not only acousmatic voices, ambient noises, and sonic drones, but also the omission of sound and the dynamic manipulation of sound and silence”. The book opens up a welcome dialogue about the sensory role sound plays in the film, especially the subtle use of sound at a microsound level to subtly affect the audio-viewer’s reception of the film. Brown provides a rich analytical approach to the use of sound in *Kairo*, among other Japanese examples, in the context of transnational horror cinema. However, further questions are triggered by *Pulse*, the American remake of *Kairo*.

Jim Sonzero’s *Pulse* (USA, 2006) regenerates questions of the role sound and music play in the film. Sonzero’s version, with a screenplay by Wes Craven and Ray Wright based on the Japanese original, is defined here as a transnational remake. A remake offers “infinite open-ended possibilities generated by all discursive practice of a [film’s] culture”. In practice it is not just a case of identifying and cross-referencing a remake from prior knowledge of the previous film and intertextual references. It is also the impact of the extra-textual discourses that surround the audio-viewing experience – the ability of the remake to refer to more general structures of intertextuality (quotation, allusion, adaptation). *Pulse* is an example of a remake that deterrioralises its narrative from *Kairo*, taking a film made in one cultural context and remaking it in another. More specifically, *Pulse* universalises *Kairo* and its central themes to make it appealing for a global audience, prompting questions such as “How might a transnational perspective offer us a deeper understanding of a specific socio-political context, and of the politics underpinning film remaking more generally?”.

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4 Commonly referred to in English as *Pulse*, although a better translation for *Kairo* would be *Circuit*.
7 The term ‘audio-viewer’ is used throughout this article, following Michel Chion, as a reminder that we do not see images and hear sounds separately, but that we ‘audio-view’ as a trans-sensorial experience. See, amongst other works by Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.
This article examines how culturally specific representations of ghosts, and their adaptations in the transnational remake, inflect these two films’ different commentaries on a shared social concern: the effects of the rising importance of technology on everyday life in advanced societies. Drawing attention to these concerns, the films’ depictions of the supernatural demonstrate cultural differentiation in the context of belief systems which, I will argue, impacts the portrayals of ghosts through both image and audio.  

By analysing the role of music and sound in Kairo and Pulse, a richer understanding of how socio-cultural contexts are represented by audio in transnational film remakes can be gained. First, this article will examine the relationship between industrial and commercial factors in the soundtracks for these films, considering thematic concerns that will be examined throughout the rest of this article.

**Commercial Implications**

Music and sound play a commercial role in transnational film remakes. In the case of Pulse, Valerie Wee has addressed the industrial contexts of the remaking process, focusing on a shift from the art house ethos of Kairo to Pulse, a more explicitly commercial product committed to predictable Hollywood horror film tropes. Wee provides a meticulous breakdown of the commercial concerns and production issues involved. This includes an assessment by the genre film division of the then newly formed Weinstein Company, distributed by Dimension films, which is crucial in tracking the youth-oriented commercial trajectory of Pulse. Wee observes how most aspects of Pulse’s production line were tailored to a specific niche audience. This includes the recognition of factors associated with the contribution of legendary horror producer Wes Craven as co-writer, and the choice of Jim Sonzero as director, hitherto known as a creator of pop videos.

Wee’s assessment of Pulse’s creative contexts goes on to highlight how casting recognisable actors “would attract ‘the right audience’”.  

This included Kirsten Bell, known for her role in the American teenage mystery TV series Veronica Mars (2004-7), Ian Somerhalder from the popular disaster-survival series Lost (2004-10), and Christina Milian, a popular R&B, teen-pop star whose third studio album So Amazin’ was released just months before Pulse. Simone Murray addresses this further in her research on the political economy of media, in which she illustrates some of the ways in which audiences take on board media industry markers of cultural praise such as film awards.  

As in Wee’s argument, this includes

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10 There is a wider debate which cannot be fully explored here around the term ‘supernatural’ in relation to Japanese culture: what is defined as supernatural in one culture is instead regarded as strange or mysterious, but natural, in Japan. Other terms, such as ghost, yūrei or yōkai could be relevant here. However, in the context of this article, I have chosen the term ‘supernatural’ to mean the irruption of the ghostly world into human experience.


the use of identifiable actors. It is also worth noting that *Kairo* features the popular Japanese model, television and film actor Kato Koyuki, who later gained recognition beyond Japan for her role in Edward Zwick’s tale of the encounter between US and Japanese martial arts traditions, *The Last Samurai* (2003), starring Tom Cruise. Well-known actor and director Yakusho Kōji also makes an appearance as the ship’s captain in *Kairo*.

While Wee’s research provides a resourceful breakdown of how *Pulse*’s production worked to achieve its economic goals, she makes no specific reference to the contribution to this potential commercial agenda of the film’s soundtrack. Both *Kairo* and *Pulse* make use of pre-existing music. Its function is to not only deliver a form of musical allusion, commenting on character perspectives, settings, and on the action more generally, but to direct awareness to extra-filmic associations, or what Kay Dickinson describes as “*micro-cultural stratification*”.13 In both films, reliance on the audio-viewer’s previous experience of pop music in given national markets fulfils both artistic and commercial purposes. In *Kairo* a sole example is used, overlapping the final shot of the film with the end-credit sequence. The lyrics of the pop song ‘Hane: Lay Down my Arms’ reinforce the narrative theme of nuclear fear and the apocalypse, pertaining to a broader socio-historical context in Japan, notably the country’s devastating bombing in World War II: “*In the blue sky, fluttering, my exposed white breast has burned up*”. Despite the lyrical relevance to *Kairo*, this upbeat rock-pop ballad is performed by Cocco, the famous Japanese pop/alternative rock singer/song-writer. In the year of *Kairo* (2001), Cocco released her third album, *Sangurōzu*, and also announced her retirement (but later returned). The use of this pop song in the film can be viewed as a commercial strategy to increase consumption of the film through synergistic appeal to an existing fan base.

*Pulse* integrates pre-existing pop songs throughout the film. Australian rock band Intercooler’s ‘Goodness of the Girl’ is heard when the audio-viewer is first introduced to Mattie and her friends. The title of the song and its lyrics are an example of what Rick Altman calls editorialising, alluding to Mattie’s characterisation as the hero, the good girl.14 The second pop reference is heard as Mattie is shown responding to her alarm clock on what is seemingly a typical morning for a college student. This appropriated music gives the illusion that the film is potentially a teenage rom-com as Mattie gets changed, applies her make-up, and checks her appearance in the mirror to the sounds of punk-rock band Overnight Low’s track ‘Delay The Wait’. The final example, ‘Esto Es Lo Que Hay’, from Venezuelan dance band Los Amigos Invisibles, is heard playing in the character Stone’s car as he travels to the


apartment of his deceased friend Josh in order to investigate his computer. This again plays an editorialising role, here alluding to Stone’s ethnicity as a character of Hispanic descent. The Latin dance beats, however, can also be interpreted as providing a stark contrast to the deathly silence of Josh’s apartment, and the ghost that waits in the darkness.

**Regenerating Narrative**

*Kairo* delivers a dystopian vision of the connections between communicative technologies, social isolation, and a viral outbreak that blurs the barriers between the human and the technological. Set in Tokyo, the film presents the parallel narratives of two protagonists: a young woman named Michi, who works at a plant nursery, and Kawashima, a university student. The two are brought together in the aftermath of various interactions with a website that invites people to meet a ghost. Michi investigates her co-worker Taguchi’s suicide, and later, the deaths of her two other co-workers. Kawashima experiences strange phenomena when he starts using the Internet. The wider plot reveals that this is not the average computer virus, but ghosts who invade the world of the living through the Internet and other forms of technology.

This leads to a number of deaths and disappearances, eventually amounting to an epidemic. There is a sense of the unknown around the use of technology in the film. This is highlighted in Kawashima’s character, who is first shown trying to sign up to the Internet. This is amplified when he meets Harue, a Computer Science postgraduate student: Kawashima struggles to recognise what a website address is, and admits to not knowing anything about computers. There is a factor of naivety that is also highlighted through *Kairo*, which draws attention to the fact that this is not a film of the last decade, but was produced when dial-up was a standard form of Internet access, and file-storage relied on floppy discs. The film’s exploration of the dangers of technology is emphasised by characters, like Kawashima, who have only just begun to use the Internet and do not fully understand it.

Likewise, Jim Sonzero’s *Pulse* (2006) explores the idea of the Internet as a bridge to alternate worlds through the experience of its main protagonist Mattie, an American university student. After investigating the suicide of her boyfriend, Josh, under mysterious circumstances, Mattie discovers that the dead are returning and attacking the living through forms of communication technology. The most striking narrative difference between the two films is the explanation, or lack of explanation, of why the ghostly invasions are occurring. *Pulse*, as will be explained below, does provide an explanation as to why the events are occurring, and in this way draws attention to their horrific nature. *Kairo* is more ambiguous, which opens the film up to provide a social study of Japan, as this article will demonstrate.

In *Kairo*, a graduate student named Yoshizaki who works with Harue explains to Kawashima the identity of the mysterious figure he has seen in the library, and why it seemed to vanish as Kawashima gave chase. Yoshizaki places Kawashima’s experience in a broader context, explaining why ghostly appearances are occurring everywhere. He tells Kawashima that the spirits inhabit a space with a finite capacity. As a result of the space running out, they
have overflown into our world, and “no matter how simple the device, once the system’s complete it’ll function on its own, and become permanent. The passage is now open ... that’s how it looks”.¹⁵ With the exception of his initial introduction to Kawashima and this scene in which he provides an explanation, Yoshizaki does not appear again in the film. Upon concluding his explanation, Yoshizaki also comments that “it’s all hypothetical”, leaving any real explanation open-ended, and raising questions as to who is responsible for the virus and why Yoshizaki can explain what is happening.

By contrast, Pulse delivers an explanation of the on-screen events. After Mattie tracks her dead boyfriend’s computer to Dexter, the man to whom it has been sold, she is informed about a memory stick Dexter finds hidden underneath the machine, which contains a virus that will shut down the ghostly invasion. It comes to light that Josh had used his hacking skills to access the network of Douglas Ziegler, a fellow hacker who had unearthed something in his computer system that allowed spirits to come through. That ‘something’ is explained in detail later on in the film by Ziegler as a super-wideband telecom project, in the course of which new frequencies were discovered. However, as Ziegler continues to explain, these frequencies are also revealed to be on a spectrum that is used by the ghosts as a source of transmission into the world of the living.

The gap in the explanation as to why spectral presences are entering the human world is one of many narrative concerns left unanswered in Kairo. This reflects a cultural acceptance in Japan of narratives that do not privilege coherence, but instead what Valerie Wee has called “the Japanese aesthetic commitment to exploring ideas and possibilities that extend beyond what is known”.¹⁶ In Japanese cinema the result is a filmic composition that delivers more than a logical narrative. As Donald Richie explains, “The idea that each unit should push the story through to its conclusion is not one to which Japanese literature, drama or film subscribes. Rather, separate scenes can be devoted to separate events.”¹⁷ More significantly, Japanese cinema finds importance in events in a film that may seem minor or tangential in a Hollywood film. This has the effect, suggests Thomas Rimmer, of moving “inward with a narrative line pushing beyond story, often beyond character, to a general realm of feeling”.¹⁸ This is where the analysis of music and sound can play a key role: in raising awareness of culturally determined modes of presentation.

Pulse, on the other hand, commits to a narrative of coherence, linearity, and clarification. Both Dexter and Mattie are goal-oriented characters, active in their motivations to stop the viral invasion from spreading. It is only at the last possible moment, when the counter-virus they upload fails and the ghostly network is re-booted, that their motivations

¹⁵ All English-language dialogue quotations are taken from the subtitles which feature on the DVD release by Optimum (2006).
¹⁶ Wee, Japanese Horror Films, p. 84.
switch to an escape plan. This episodic structure is clearly identifiable as an example of the tight cause-and-effect progression of the dominant Hollywood film tradition, in which “goals are defined, created by reversals of intention, points of no return, and new circumstances demanding that goals be recast”. This initial comparison demonstrates how narrative organisation suggests cultural differentiation.

**Ghostly Cultural Considerations**

In *Kairo*, ghosts lack personality and human responsiveness; they represent a postmodern/post-humanist manifestation of a much older Japanese icon. Japanese ghosts, most commonly described as yūrei (translating as “faint/dim spirit”) are historically portrayed as being female spirits wearing a white kimono with long unbound black hair, missing legs and feet. However, while Kurosawa’s ghosts “frighten through traditional strategies, including mutilated appearance, unearthly speech, and surprise, it is their relationship to – and constitution through – digital special effects technologies that promises their biggest scare”.

Late-industrialist and technology-driven ideological values drive the ghostly visual presentations in *Kairo*. Manifesting in cyberspace, their exterior corporeal presence is merged with artificiality, taking the form of faded electronic spectral manifestations, and signifying how technology has become “inseparable from the self.”

This can be linked to the indigenous Shinto system of ritual practice based on the natural world, which observes that everything has a spirit, whether inanimate or living, and is regarded as being part of a unified single creation, as linguistic etymology suggests: “When someone dies, his or her spirit moves from kono-yo (the world of the living, or this world ‘here’) to ano-yo (the world of the dead, the world over yonder, ‘there’). As such, the two worlds exist simultaneously, occupying the same space and time, with permeable boundaries between the two.” While in the folk beliefs of Shinto and more generally in Japan it is argued that the natural and social environments are interrelated, *Kairo*, however, draws attention to the loss of connection created by the effects of technology and the isolation that saturates society.

This is also amplified by the soundtrack, which uses the sounds of technology to signify increasing urban alienation. For example, as Kawashima sits in an amusement arcade, the looped melodies and the whirring of the machines create the illusion that he is interacting in a busy urban social space. Besides the sound of the technology itself and the appearance of a sole ghostly black shadow, however, Kawashima is alone. Furthermore, when the spirits’ voices are heard on the telephone, they are both disconnected from a visible bodily

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representation and dehumanised by the use of heavy digital distortion. It is only when Kurosawa allows us to see and hear the ghosts that their humanity temporarily appears.

This is best exemplified in a scene towards the end of *Kairo*, as Kawashima and Michi are shown trying to flee the city, and Kawashima is directly confronted by a spirit. Refusing to acknowledge death or a belief in the supernatural, he maintains a defensive stance, denying what he sees, despite the apparent physical presence of the ghost in front of him. It is therefore the soundtrack that guides the audio-viewer’s comprehension of this scene. After sourcing fuel in an abandoned factory, Kawashima becomes trapped in a room the door of which is framed with red tape. In response, a low synthesised drone enters the soundtrack, followed by a laboured, reverberating exhalation that merges into the dialogue at the word “forever”. This is swiftly followed by an electronic, percussive effect, apparently non-diegetic in nature. The camera responds by coming closer to Kawashima’s point-of-view, revealing the ghostly outline of a figure on the far side of the room, close to where Kawashima entered.

“*Death was ... eternal loneliness*”, utters this figure, in grainy, electronically manipulated speech. As Kawashima’s breathing becomes urgent and he backs towards the door, grasping at the handle, the ghost utters the words “*Help. Help. Help*”. Despite Kawashima’s words of denial, his heavy breathing is reinforced by low, sustained electronic tones on the soundtrack, which reveal his fear. The spirit repeats the same words about eternal loneliness as Kawashima continues to reason that the ghost is not real, despite conversing with him. He makes a rapid move in an attempt to catch the spirit and to prove that he will disappear, but as he grasps the spirit’s shoulders an electronic rush of sound is heard before silence descends.

A low, pulsing electronic tone then enters quietly, creating a wave in volume as it dips and then crescendos while Kawashima, falling to the floor, slowly backs away from the spirit. The tone is sustained momentarily before a percussive marker brings in a prominent pulse. The camera reverts to the subject position of Kawashima as the spirit’s voice enters, heavily bathed in reverse reverberation which “*makes the attack of the ghost’s voice swell at the beginning of each word*” as he states: “*I am ... real*”. The pulsing continues under the dialogue, again delivered in waves of altering dynamics. A higher register of electronic sound and distorted audio rumbles create additional sound layering. As the spirit starts to move towards Kawashima and the camera, percussive waves and echoes of additional electronics are panned across the speakers from right to left, accompanying the swaying, fluctuating movement of the spirit. Intermittent static is also heard and, as the spirit comes closer to what is now the audio-viewer’s eye-level, the sound of Internet dial-up enters the soundtrack, eventually breaking into a single sustained tone as if replicating a dead phone line and foreshadowing Kawashima’s disconnection from life. Brown notes how in interviews

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24 Brown refers to the use of continuous pitches or clusters of frequencies as producing an ambient drone, a device utilised by Kurosawa as an aural device to highlight a disconnection from environments and temporal suspension in time despite a character’s on-screen visibility. Brown explores how this creates an aesthetics of discomfort. See Brown, *Japanese Horror and the Transnational Cinema of Sensations*.

25 Brown, p. 49.
Kurosawa states that he had wanted it to sound as if Kawashima “had been trapped in a machine when he enters the factory room”\(^{26}\), again emphasising the theme of isolation.

*Kairo* draws parallels between human and spectral identity when organic dialogue is electronically manipulated through sound-design technology. There is ambiguity as the living and the dead commune, part of the film’s haunting critique of technologically induced alienation. As commonly noted in initial reviews of the film, *Kairo*’s spirits remind the characters of their isolation and loss of social interaction in the faceless realm of impersonal online global communications. Tom Mes observes how “the horror lies not in the threat of an almighty, autonomous technology that might take over or destroy our lives, but in the effects that the presence of technology, and in particular communications technology like the Internet and mobile phones, has on our lives and our ways of communicating as human beings in society.”\(^ {27}\)

This commentary also connects to the backlash against the digital revolution on account of its creation of the *hikikomori* (‘shut-ins’) phenomenon, in which Japanese youths draw away from familial relations into an isolated existence, often communicating solely through online means. In *Pulse*, the spectres are presented as alien and as part of a virus that is a contagion of media. The horrific visual nature of the remake’s spectres defines them as unhuman, “malevolent entities feeding on the life force of the living”.\(^ {28}\) Again, however, the sound design of the remake reinforces the visual presentation of these spectres, which are now given a monstrous face. The visual illustration of the sonic is necessary in the US version because it confirms the horrific narrative meaning. This narrative reinforcement functions as part of the dominant Hollywood film model, and is a technique often adopted in American remakes. In the Japanese version, horrific sound and allusive visuals are all that is needed to establish narrative connotations.

In the latter half of *Pulse*, Mattie’s room-mate Isabelle is shown doing her laundry in the building’s communal laundrette. As she starts to place her clothes in the washer, the metal gate to the laundry room suddenly closes and a low electronic pitch enters the soundtrack over the ambient hum of the washing machine. The film cuts from a close-up of Isabelle’s face to a panning shot emanating from the rear of the row of dryers behind her, moving right to left as if someone is peering at her. This pan is accompanied by a breathy sound, electronically manipulated, which reinforces the fact that someone or something is sharing the space with her. Further electronic tones bleed from the initial drone before we cut back to Isabelle, whose attention is drawn to the sound of a power source shutting down, followed by a point-of-view shot of the flickering of a light bulb above her. The shifting electronic tones are still heard in the background, along with the continued whirring of the washer, together with an added layer of electronic tones that produce a pulse-like sound.

\(^{26}\) Brown, p. 49.


entering the soundtrack as the camera focusses on the failing light. We cut back to Isabelle’s face looking up at the light and then re-adopt her point of her view, returning to the light as it flickers again before a reassuring surge of generator sound indicates that power has been restored.

As the film cuts back to Isabelle continuing to do her laundry, the original sustained electronic tone is maintained on the soundtrack while the diegetic sound of the dryer door opening is suddenly foregrounded, with all other electronic sound lowered in the mix, with the exception of a hollow-sounding wind effect. The film cuts back to a wide shot of the laundry room as a gush of electronic sound accompanies the sight of an item of clothing being thrown out of the tumble dryer, seemingly of its own accord. It is at this point that the sound layers start to build up and the sustained tones of high register strings are brought to the foreground – a generic Hollywood signifier of dread and suspense. A crescendo is heard from the strings after the first clothing item has fallen out of the machine, followed by a low human vocal sound, almost grunt-like, that is electronically manipulated to alter its recognisability as a distinctly human acoustic sound. The camera zooms in on Isabelle’s face as the strings continue to rise in volume, joined by the return of the indistinct vocal sounds. Isabelle takes a forced breath as the lights are heard and seen flickering again, and the sound of the clothes being thrown out of the machine is amplified, producing a hard thud. A further sustained, high-pitched, electronic drone is then added louder in the mix than the strings. Further layering is provided by a wordless choral passage dominated by female vocals, adding to the otherworldly nature of the overall sound design. As Isabelle glances inside the machine, the blended choral music and electronic drones fade out, with just the sound of the flickering light heard in the foreground of the mix, along with the final sound of clothes shifting in the machine.

It is then that the monstrous spectre emerges from the dryer drum, head lunging, with what appears to be five arms and legs flailing out of the machine in an insect-like manner, scored by a cacophony of electro-acoustic vocal effects. A bird-like screech is unleashed, synchronised with the image of the screaming spectre’s facial expression, leading the audio-viewer to believe that it produces this screech organically, along with the amplified sound of the spectre’s hand slamming on the floor and the unearthly, metallic sound effects that accompany its movements. These effects dominate the sound-mix in this sequence, which also consists of electronic drones, the sounds of the flickering light, and manipulated choral voices. In the final moments of the scene the spectre unleashes a roar-like vocal sound and suddenly appears to suck the life out of Isabelle. A side-profile close-up, paralleling her with the spectre, is visually effective and concludes with Isabelle releasing a scream that is electronically manipulated before the cut to the next scene, the sound bridging the transition.

The grotesque visual representation of the spectre represents “Hollywood’s practice of illusionism” nevertheless “producing a coherent imaginary subject position”.29 Despite
being portrayed as unknown malevolent forces, the spectres are rationalised according to this dominant model of cinematic practice. This is achieved by drawing attention to the representation of evil, which they embody through the use of shocking visual and aural effects. The demonised figures in *Pulse* are thus defined “*in traditionally Western terms of abjection, where any and all entities that flout culturally determined boundaries and categories are viewed as abomina\(t\)ions*”.\textsuperscript{30} The premise of this lies in the dialectics of opposition – which aligns the natural with the good and the supernatural/unnatural with evil – that Beth Braun notes in her discussion on American television shows with supernatural elements: “*there is of course nothing new in using supernatural settings and characters to play out narratives of good versus evil*”.\textsuperscript{31} Traditional Hollywood films often use these models of opposition as the underlying dimensions of conflict in their discourse. Many Hollywood supernatural horror films depict the supernatural/unnatural negatively. Polanski’s *Rosemary’s Baby* (USA, 1968), Friedkin’s *The Exorcist* (USA, 1973), and Rosenberg’s *The Amityville Horror* (USA, 1979), for example, suggest some of the ways in which “*Western/Judeo-Christian beliefs tend to relegate the spiritual to an alternative realm beyond that of the physical and view crossing between these realms as an unnatural and, ultimately, threatening act*”.\textsuperscript{32}

The cultural differentiation of good and evil is not found in *Kairo*, where the ambiguous, human-like, organic representations reflect a mixture of Buddhist and Shinto thought. Katarzyna Marak specifically draws on these spiritual teachings in her discussion of Japanese and American horror cinema, observing the dualistic Shinto/Buddhist understanding of the world – “*all things bear good and evil inside*”.\textsuperscript{33} In Japanese Buddhism this is demonstrated through the interconnected concept of human beings as good and evil, while Shinto recognises that everyone has the intrinsic potential for good. This ambivalence is echoed by C. Scott Littleton, who expands on the dichotomy of good and evil, noting that in Shinto tradition “*all phenomena, both animate and inanimate, are thought to possess both ‘rough’ and ‘gentle’, or negative and positive, characteristics depending on the circumstances*”.\textsuperscript{34} In summary, it is the blending of opposites, including the natural and supernatural, and striving to maintain the balance between nature and human relationships, known as wa (‘benign harmony’), that is at the core of Shinto theology.

Drawing upon *Kairo’s* representation of traditional Japanese cultural elements, *Pulse* presents a point of negotiation between cultural representation and re-representation. The


audio-viewer experiences moments that are directly inspired by the original film in its narrative and visuals, such as the scene in *Kairo* when Yabe, one of Michi’s co-workers, discovers one of the forbidden rooms. The meaning of the red tape that is used to seal off doorways or portals that contain the alienated ghost forms of the victims is never fully explained. These ghosts are instrumental, however, in helping to spread the contagion of loneliness through contact with figures like Yabe. As he enters one such isolated space, only ambient sounds are heard at first, building anticipation for the appearance of something inhuman in the unsettling quietness. Yabe walks towards the rear wall, which is shrouded in darkness. The lighting then shifts and the back wall is slowly illuminated to reveal a mass of red tape stuck over what was previously a window. As the end wall of the room fades into well-lit focus, an unaccompanied solo female voice drifts on to the soundtrack. Her wordless moan rings out as Yabe stands completely still before turning to look behind him, as if he hears her voice.

A woman is shown standing against the opposite wall, motionless and robotic, her hands by her side and her face masked by shadow. She is not the source of the melody being sung: her face and mouth show no movement. The next shot reveals a close-up of Yabe’s terrified face before we cut back to a static shot of the woman from Yabe’s point-of-view, as she begins to walk towards him. The woman’s extended movements are played out in slow-motion as a high-pitched, synthesised sound accompanies her movement, voice-like in its delivery, filtering in and out as it too is slowed down in tempo and electronically manipulated. The slow-motion speed of the woman’s movement is exaggerated as she is shown almost stumbling and contorting her body to regain her balance as she proceeds towards Yabe. The contrast of speed between the woman’s much slower, unnaturally drawn-out movement and Yabe’s reactive natural movement “upsets the conventional ‘naturalism’ of the diegetic world, marking it as supernatural”. While the ghost’s movement could be described as an inhuman projection in the digital landscape of the film, it is also an example of the use of a Japanese performance style that alludes to a wider socio-cultural context.

The woman’s movement is inspired by the avant-garde dance style of *butoh* (in its basic form it translates as ‘dance step’). Born in Japan after the turmoil of the post-World War II era, *butoh* is a dance whose basic form relies on the body in various changing conditions; its minimalist movements place the body and face in a state of constant transformation as the *butoh* dancer “endeavours to reveal his relationship to the inner world, to the unconscious”. The organic nature of the form and use of aesthetic characteristics that

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35 Hughes, ‘Ailing Screens, Viral Videos’, p. 32.
36 The term *butoh* is made up of the characters 舞, meaning to ‘dance’, and 踏, meaning ‘to step’ which would be rendered as *butō*. However, because of the cultural connotations attached to terms for ‘dance’ in Japanese, the Hepburn Romanization is used here with an introductory definition.
challenge western archetypes of beauty produce distorted and grotesque physical imagery in order for the dancer, again in the words of butoh co-founder Hijikata Tatsumi, to “reveal the human being in his banality”. Death is a theme often explored in butoh. Co-founder Ohno Kazuo defines it as a means “to meander, or to move, as it were, in twists and turns between the realms of the living and the dead”.38 Considering this meaning, some features of butoh, such as the crumbling white painted body mask, have often evoked the trauma of the World War II bombings and can be read as a creative expression of pain and anxiety regarding nuclear war—a method of performance centred on the acceptance and contemplation of imperfection and the constant flux of all things. As Hijikata Tatsumi puts it: “The dancer, through the butoh spirit, confronts the origin of his fears: a dance which crawls towards the bowels of the earth.”39

This example from Kairo demonstrates how sound, music, and dance can be interpreted more deeply to understand a socio-historical context, but also how that context can be adapted to inflect contemporary themes. A national dance tradition is used here to highlight metamorphosis as a metaphor for the breakdown of communication in a technologically motivated society. Pulse adopts a similar approach, delivering a vulnerable moment in the film in which the inhuman and metaphorically faceless viral spectres are humanised, in order to emphasise their ontological and existential threat. Stone, an equivalent to Yabe’s character, visits the deceased Josh’s apartment and encounters a spectre in a moment that adapts the scene described above in Kairo. Stone hears muffled, high-pitched voices coming from Josh’s bedroom; the door is sealed with red tape. As Stone forces the door open, a low drone is heard, paired with higher pitched pulsing tones, followed by a string glissando that is sustained as he starts to look around the room. A lingering high-pitched ring is heard, joined by a soprano vocal delivering two tonal moans, suggesting a living presence. As Stone walks towards the bathroom, the layers of sound start to increase. The high-pitched pulsing tones fade in and out of the mix, while a continuous electronic buzzing and whispered vocal effects are added, before a thud is heard from the bedroom. Stone turns, reacting to the sound.

Here a range of voices becomes more distinct and is placed high in the mix. Bathed in reverberation and electronically manipulated, the words require concentration on the audio-viewer’s part to comprehend their meaning. Emerging from the multiple voices are the words “help me”. At this point, the sound has built up with the pulsing tones and electronic buzzing reinforcing the suggestion that an unnatural presence shares the space. As Stone moves back into the bedroom, the camera’s focus widens, and he sees that the window is covered in red

38 Yoshito Ohno and Kazuo Ōno, Kazuo Ohno’s World from Without and Within, Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1999, p. 205.
39 Hijikata Tatsumi in Jean Viala and Nourit Masson-Sekine, Butoh: Shades of Darkness, p. 188.
tape similar to that which confronts Yabe in *Kairo*. The next shot adopts Stone’s point-of-view, followed by another shot in which the camera is positioned directly in front of Stone’s face, adopting the perspective of the ghost. This contrasts with *Kairo*, where Yabe’s point-of-view dominates the equivalent scene.

As Stone stares directly at the camera, the upper layers of electronic sound subside and an amplified bass drone sound and crackle effect are heard before the camera shifts back to Stone’s point-of-view. This first shot, as Stone sees something in the shadows, creates a parallel between the spirit and the audio-viewer, since when he looks directly at the camera, he is essentially looking at us, suggesting that perhaps we have become the ghosts. This aligns with the film’s commentary on our relationship with technology and how, instead of bringing people together, it encourages an isolation that may result in us becoming ghostly shadows of our former selves as we rely more and more on technology to communicate.

After this close-up of Stone’s reaction there is a cut to his point-of-view as an arm becomes visible in the dark shadows across from him. High-pitched tremolo strings enter, along with a low electronic drone slide; electronically manipulated choral vocals are heard in the mix as the strings, also modified, dramatically rise to a crescendo. String *glissando* effects intermittently enter among the tremolos as the ghost begins to step out of the shadows and walk towards him. We cut back to a close-up of Stone’s frozen face before the camera resumes his point-of-view, the film utilising the same shot/reverse-shot approach as *Kairo*. While the female ghost in this sequence has the same human-like appearance as her equivalent in *Kairo*, her image as she walks towards Stone suddenly flickers like a computer-generated hologram.

The spectre’s wavering movement could be read as a parallel of the *butoh* dance form that inspired the equivalent scene in *Kairo*. Although negotiating a re-working of this scene, however, there is a culturally specific meaning that is lost by the computer-generated representation of *Pulse*’s ghost. Despite *butoh*’s improvisatory nature, its focus on the consciousness of the body itself is rejected by the artificiality of *Pulse*’s replication. This is reinforced by the combination of the crackling of static with a synchronised flickering visual, as if the ghost is being transmitted into the room. As she gets nearer to Stone, his point-of-view shifts out of focus, while the soundtrack continues to crescendo: the vocals build up, producing a flood of wordless sound, with the higher register string tremolo and electronic bass. The ghost’s face begins to come into focus and we cut back to Stone with a percussive thud as he jumps across the bed. This gives purposeful momentum to his action as he begins to rip the red tape off the window, looking outside as the camera, shooting from street level, captures his face looking out, one might suppose, at humanity.

As Stone tries to escape, a more distinct ticking beat is heard. A sustained, higher register electronic tonal layer is added, producing what is almost a ringing sound. The next shot cuts to a static view under the bed, with Stone quickly falling to the other side of it and into shot, the audio-viewer adopting his point-of-view as he looks around for the spectre. All sound drops to a minimal level at this point, with the exception of the lower drone and the
sudden build-up of a second wave of electronic sound as Stone suddenly looks up in horror. The next shot focuses on his upper body, and then reverses back to his point-of-view as the face of the ghost slowly appears over the top of the bed, looking down on him. The block of electronic sound is reinforced by the return of the high-register tremolo strings, before this wall of sound is interrupted by the sound of a camera shutter in a double burst of sound. This is synchronised with the face of the ghost jolting forward, as if it is being projected into the moment by the audio effect. Her face now comes into focus: letting out an inhuman screech, she leaps forward, her hands clutching the side of the bed. This replaces the murmuring vocal delivery heard earlier in the scene with an alien-like sound.

Any parallel with the series of shots in *Kairo* in which Yabe’s point-of-view is adopted as the ghost peers over at him is again diminished. The artificiality of the spectre in *Pulse* is reinforced as her face lunges forward towards Stone and into a close-up; a visual effect casts her into the physical space of the room as if she has materialised from a computer. Her movement is also marked with a distorted bird-like screech. Stone’s scream follows at this point, his voice electronically manipulated to signify an out-of-body sound. The accompanying visual shows a computer-generated image of his face ascending towards the camera, which adopts the ghost’s point-of-view. We then cut to a black screen, marked by an electronic thud as he becomes a technological avatar.

In *Pulse*, the score reinforces narrative coherence. The audio-viewer is made aware of what is about to happen through the highly structured nature of the Hollywood score. As Peter Hutchings observes, music in the horror film “*is often foregrounded as a presence* [...] *this can manifest itself in shocking or discordant effects of various kinds that seek to support or amplify visual moments of shock or suspense*”.40 This approach contrasts with the sense of disembodiment that *Kairo* creates through the electronic audio treatment of its human voices. The use of reverberation and echoes disconnects voice from body. Coupled with the fact that vocal delivery moves between different sound channels, this challenges the audio-viewer’s ability to form a coherent narrative interpretation. Alternatively, the animalistic approach to the spectres’ voices in *Pulse* does not create such a challenge. It is the scoring and character dialogue that articulates their motivations.

**Scoring Technological Concern**

While the treatment of music and sound draws attention to culturally specific representations of the supernatural in *Pulse*, and this invites comparisons to *Kairo*, the scoring is also indicative of wider social concerns. The apocalyptic outcome of *Pulse* is symptomatic of a proliferation of, and consumer reliance on, reproductive electronic and digital technology. The putatively infectious nature of the technology can also be linked to broader social concerns in the films, in relation to their period of production and the difference in technological advancements.

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Pulse, released in the year preceding the introduction of the iPhone in summer 2007, is littered with footage of people using mobile devices that to an audio-viewer today would seem outdated. The prolific use of mobile technology presented throughout the film, however, reminds us of a society beyond the world of the film which constantly needs to update its forms of consumer technology. Computers also play an integral role in Pulse. In one scene after Josh’s death, Mattie and her friends are shown using a form of Messenger on their computers; even as a ghost, Josh participates in communication through this medium, using the software to ask his friends for help.

Pulse’s director Sonzero recognises this and heightens Kairo’s initial focus on the Internet as the source of the ghosts’ invasion by drawing attention to the devices in a much more overt manner to demonstrate the dangers of technological advancement – which today are more closely associated with the heightened use of social media and cyber bullying/stalking, themselves referenced in the film during a scene near the beginning when Mattie attends a psychology class. The focus on the devices has an impact on the use of diegetic and non-diegetic sounds in the film. Stark audio design is heavily electronically manipulated to emphasise the very sounds of the technology that endanger its users. This is highlighted in a number of scenes in which people are shown using mobile phones and computers, such as in the scene where Mattie, Isabelle, and Tim meet in an Internet café to discuss the mysterious package that Josh has sent Mattie; the diegetic sounds of computer games and clicking keyboard keys litter the soundtrack, and, placed high in the mix alongside their dialogue, emphasise the constant use of the devices.

Kairo, however, released after the turn of the millennium and the rise of the Internet, explores the fears and anxiety of a technologically advancing society with concerns about isolation and social dysfunction. This is the case in Japan with thriving telecommunication companies like NTT DOCOMO, Inc. and the multinational information technology NEC Corporation constantly delivering new products. Notably, therefore, Kairo expands its critique to include the institutional structures that have promoted these technologies through commercialism. This is particularly implied when Michi and Kawashima are shown sailing away from an apocalyptic wide-angle shot of a city. This backdrop is Tokyo, the once thriving late-capitalist technological epicentre now represented as a stark and desolate urban void. This lifeless cityscape is accompanied by the sounds of the very thing that is feared to be lost because of an immersion in technology: humanity.

Kairo’s non-diegetic music often features orchestral scoring, the use of acoustic instruments adding a sentimental humanism to the urban desolation of the visuals. This is particularly the case when Michi and Kawashima are shown fleeing the city, driving through the deserted streets of Tokyo, the camera adopting Michi’s point-of-view behind the wheel, accompanied by a suitably propulsive orchestral score. Whispered voices are heard throughout the film – victims calling out for help – and at one point in the film, when Junco is consumed with her own loneliness and loses her will to live, she literally disappears, leaving a black stain on the wall of Michi’s apartment. As Michi calls out for her friend, the stain turns
into ashes and a gust of wind suddenly fills the apartment. With the ashes swirling around, a final disembodied ghostly wail is heard on the soundtrack before the ashes disappear through the open balcony door and window.

A similar vocal audio effect is heard earlier on in the film when Yabe visits Taguchi’s home, whose shadowy stain remains on the wall in the very spot where he committed suicide. However, as Taguchi appears to see his friend in place of the shadow and asks him what happened, the film cuts to a medium shot of the wall, revealing Taguchi’s shadow again. An electronically manipulated wail with a glissando effect is heard over the lone, female, and wordless vocal that dominates the soundtrack at this point in the film. As Jones observes, “the humans are ultimately subject to introspective decline. Fear is propagated by technology in ‘Kairo’, but it is coupled with the longing for contact, not a desire for annihilation”. This narrative contrasts with Pulse, which focuses its commentary on the parasitic media devices themselves and the control they have over people, infecting them like a virus. In Pulse the technology becomes the other, while in Kairo, the threat is represented as coming from within the subject.

In one of the final scenes of Pulse, the audio-viewer is made aware of the full role played by technology in these spectral attacks. Mattie and Dexter, having fled the city, are resting in a stolen car. As the camera zooms in on the pair sleeping, chromatic shifts played by strings are present in the underscoring, signifying unease and thus the oncoming supernatural threat. Crackles of radio static enter as a member of the United States Army delivers an emergency announcement heard by Mattie: “cell phones, computers and PDAs are all conduits for the invasion. Dispose of all technology before proceeding to these locations.” As the camera zooms in on Mattie’s mobile phone on the dashboard, high-pitched string tremolos enter the soundtrack. In her naivety she checks it, rather than turning it off. The tremolo strings continue with the addition of a percussive thud, swiftly followed by metallic groans from the roof of the truck. High sustained strings slowly enter and the camera adopts the point-of-view of someone peering in at the window, accompanied by low electro-acoustic vocal effects. As the threat rises in intensity, so does the music. As Mattie wipes the condensation off the window, the groans momentarily fade as the glass is suddenly smashed and the screech of the spectre that has broken through is answered by Mattie’s own screams.

Interestingly, as the spectre is shown peering in at Mattie, her ghostly reflection and hollow blacked-out eyes are similar to the more human representations of Kairo’s spectres. This may allude to the blurred barriers between technology and its users, signifying a symmetrical view of the interaction between human beings and media. The ideological values of the society represented in Pulse place such importance on this technology that, even when Mattie knows that her cell phone is a trigger after hearing the announcement on the radio, the impulse to check it is still maintained. As Wee observes, “‘Pulse’ depicts technology largely

as a tool and a conduit, while the supernatural threat is ultimately introduced by human actions and decisions.”

The direct parallel between ghost and human is also prevalent throughout the scenes in the film in which victims of the curse appear on webcams as ghostly apparitions. They are presented in passive, lifeless states, or inflicting harm on themselves. One is shown wearing a plastic bag over his head and is repeatedly shown failing to pull it off: the image keeps cutting and going back to the beginning of the feed. The idea of showing victims reacting through a webcam feed is regenerated from Kairo. This can be interpreted as a form of identity collapse within the very frame of the remake, as the “images effectively collapse the boundary between (the images found in) the Japanese original and the remake, even as these same images resonate with actual, real world, web-cam images that both films’ audiences are familiar with having engaged in similar digital forms of communication in actual life”.

In this way the original film is invading the remake, in a parallel with the ghosts’ invasion of reality, symbolising the virality of the effects of technology through the medium itself.

The soundtrack of Pulse feeds on the media proliferation emphasised throughout by the images in the film. This is demonstrated in the opening credits, which deliver a prologue dominated by sound. An electronic throbbing is heard prior to the opening shots, produced by a manipulated sound effect of what could be a fan rotating, perhaps representing the sound of a computer fan. A low electronic beat accompanies the pulse, joined by waves of percussive low bass, repeating the same three-note pattern of three percussive thuds followed by an additional electronic moaning. A guitar scratch effect is heard, followed by an electrical flicker that accompanies a visual ripple of white light across the logo for the US theatrical distributor, Dimension Films, followed by the next title credit, bearing the logo for one of the three production companies involved, Distant Horizon. As this disappears from the screen, a ghostly electro-acoustic wind-like effect is heard over the consistent, layered, pulsing ostinato which sounds like a computer system starting up. As the first words of the main credits appear on screen a more distinct electro-acoustic static enters, breaking away into smaller sound bites signifying computer coding. Digitised sound effects are synchronised with the appearance of the main credits displayed in the format of digital data and shown scrolling across the screen before breaking up like fragmented pieces of coding. These are followed by a computer boot-up sound effect and a close-up of an email text box in the background fading to black as the credits continue to appear.

As more digitised images begin to appear and then fade, a number of human voices are heard on the soundtrack, one after the other, linking the human to the digitised nature of the opening credit sequence. The soundtrack and images carefully link to different forms of digital technology in the background: “At TCC Northeast, we have the largest cellular network in the five-state... Join the fun at Mondo Net. You get instant access to your friends.” The credits continue with the same electronic ostinato pulsing away on the soundtrack, with

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42 Wee, Japanese Horror Films and Their American Remakes, p. 175.
43 Wee, Japanese Horror Films and Their American Remakes, p. 176.
swells of sustained organ tones entering at different points across the sequence. The voices become layered and the sounds of digital flickers, static, and crackling become more intense, until individual voices can no longer be identified. Instead the audio-viewer is shown various lines of computerised text taken from a number of media interfaces, including social media. These lines of text are layered over one another, scrolling across the screen from right to left. A moving human mouth appears behind the layers of messaging text as the words become more and more congested. This discordant mix of voices is overshadowed by a gush of heavily manipulated sound, replicating a rising glissando on multiple strings, but speeded up and altered to deliver an explosion of sound that is seemingly sucked into a vacuum along with the ostinato. All sound is then shut down with a final sound perhaps replicating the noise of a computer system powering down. The word Pulse appears on the screen, flickering once over a blurred backdrop of coloured shadows: people on a college campus, the sound of their voices leaking onto the soundtrack.

The superimposition of sounds heard in the opening credits of Pulse, created by composer Elia Cmiral’s mix of electronic and acoustic materials, points to the inseparability of modern-day society and digital media.44 Throughout the film, the composer uses strings playing in the upper registers to create spectral sounds that are often joined by electronically altered vocal effects, synthesised pulses, and electronic sonic counterparts. This mix produces a homogenous soundscape that reflects the socio-cultural concerns of the film—the inseparability of the spectres, representing technology and its users. The relentless drive of the soundtrack never seems to pause for breath as it mirrors the momentum of the images, which continually deliver visceral shocks. Kairo also utilises electro-mechanical sound effects to introduce the film. Brown notes how, prior to the production credits, “for a full 17 seconds we hear nothing but the chirping, squealing sounds of a computer modem handshaking with a server to establish a connection so that the transfer of information may occur”. While this moment can be linked to Pulse’s opening credits, Brown goes on to describe the dial-up sounds as being “the voices of electronic ‘circuits’ (the literal meaning of the word ‘kairo’) communicating with each other”.45 By likening these sounds to a form of dialogue, they are humanised, connecting those who once lived and use the network as a channel to re-enter the world with a living humanity who risk becoming disconnected by an over-reliance on the very same digital network and more broadly, technology at large. Kairo’s opening is in stark contrast to the cacophony of sounds with which Pulse opens—a much more aggressive assault on the senses that draws attention to the film’s monstrous presentation of ghostly transference.

44 Discussing the score for Pulse in an interview with Randall D. Larson, Cmiral describes how he “used the Prague Orchestra, recording on the Internet for a couple of days, a large string ensemble with no brass and four or five clarinets playing the highest possible tone”. See Randall D. Larson, ‘The Splintered Scores of Elia Cmiral’, 27 November 2008, http://www.buysoundtrax.com/larsons_soundtrax_11_27_08.html.
Kairo, in comparison, makes use of silence, guiding the audio-viewer to reflect on the ways in which humanity is represented throughout the film. In the scene in which Michi is shown visiting Yabe’s apartment after he has seemingly gone missing, for instance, there is a sudden shift in the soundtrack. As Michi enters the apartment, the use of silence creates an inhuman feeling: only ambient sounds accompany Michi’s voice. An ashen shadow is shown on the wall, a visual representation of emptiness and loss, paralleling the muted soundtrack. This dissonance triggers a more active interpretive engagement from the audience owing to the silence’s rupturing of conventional filmic transparency. As Michi stands in the apartment, the shot of her looking at the shadow is reversed and “ambient noise drops out completely in the mix”\(^\text{46}\), resulting in the audio-viewer being placed both visually and aurally in the position of the ghost. The words “help me” pan left and right to create an effect of closeness, as if they are rising from the audio-viewer himself/herself. They are heard clearly despite the reverberation and filtering effects that are applied, and at a volume that suggests Michi is being spoken to directly as the only person in the room. However, Michi’s response reveals that she does not seem to hear Yabe’s spirit’s words. Her facial expression remains neutral as her eyes search the shadow on the wall.\(^\text{47}\)

The complete elimination of ambient sound in the mix emphasises the fact that the words fall on deaf ears. This is reinforced further through the absence of any diegetic sound as Michi leaves the room, with not even the sound of the door heard closing behind her. In this scene, the voice is present but unable to break through into the diegesis. Our struggle to rationalise this meaning adds to the ghostly moment. After adopting Yabe’s point-of-view we cut to a static position looking into the room from the door, with Yabe’s shadow now in front of the camera. The words “help me” are repeated a fifth time, creating a verbal transition across the shots and creating a distance from the source. However, this distance is interrupted for the sixth and final utterance, with the volume increased as if the ghostly disembodied voice is infecting both the audio-viewer’s perspective and Michi herself. As Yabe’s humanised plea to Michi goes unheard, the shot/reverse shot pattern that links him to her is destabilised: his disappearance unsettles the privileged position of the human being as the primary structuring force of the shot. This reinforces the fear, articulated by Jones, that “[t]he more we use technology to expand beyond the means of the anatomical self, the more we fear technology is somehow intruding upon the self”\(^\text{48}\), until it is no longer human.

\(^\text{46}\) Brown, Japanese Horror and the Transnational Cinema of Sensations, p. 46.

\(^\text{47}\) Discussing the previous scene, in which Michi calls Yabe on the telephone, Steven T. Brown notes how Yabe’s voice during the phone call is an example of what Michel Chion means by the ‘acousmatic’, “the auditory situation in which we hear sounds without seeing their cause or source” (Chion, Film: A Sound Art, New York: University of Columbia Press, 2009, p. 465). Yabe’s voice is then ‘de-acousmatised’ once we discover that Michi will go to speak to him directly, which will establish the source of the disembodied voice on the telephone. However, Brown observes that Yabe’s voice is ‘re-acousmatised’ once more as his body is no longer physically present, with just the black body-like stain on the wall remaining. See Brown, Japanese Horror and the Transnational Cinema of Sensations, pp. 44-45.

\(^\text{48}\) Jones, ‘The Technologies of Isolation’, p. 188.
Analysis of film remakes, I have been arguing here, must consider the "material phenomenon produced by a system of institutional interests" through an analysis of sound and music, particularly when culturally specific representations need to be considered. Technophobia, for example, may transcend national and cultural boundaries, providing an example of a fear becoming universal across capitalist, technologically advanced societies, since ideological foundations dominate the manner in which these anxieties are presented in audio-visual constructs. Analysis of a film like Kairo and its transnational remake, Pulse, offers new perspectives on how technology undermines social cohesion through culturally determined means. Furthermore, the audio-visual examples analysed above draw attention to the role sound and music must play not only in the critique of technological advancements in these particular examples, but in future assessments of transnational film remakes and their film scores.

49 Murray, ‘Materializing Adaptation Theory’, p. 10.
The one-day conference ‘Archaeology of Fashion Film’, organised by the University of the Arts London, Central Saint Martins, and the University of Southampton, proposed that the ‘fashion film’ is an object of study worthy of greater consideration in the field of Film Studies, and foregrounded media archaeology as the methodology of reference for the exploration of this corpus. The event was named after the 2017-2019 UK Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded research project led by fashion historian and theorist Caroline Evans (Central Saint Martins, London, UK) as Principal Investigator, media scholar Jussi Parikka (University of Southampton, UK) and art historian Marketa Uhlirova (Central Saint Martins), both co-investigators, with Lucy Moyse Ferreira (Central Saint Martins) as Post-Doctoral Research Assistant. The Conference Programme aimed to epitomize the research project in its interdisciplinary approach and its effort to mix different methodologies at the intersection of film, fashion, history, industry, technology and culture.

The day thus featured both keynotes from film historians and media studies scholars and plenary discussion sessions with contemporary fashion filmmakers and producers. As the research project put it, the goals were to interrogate both “the transformative effects of film on fashion” and also “how contemporary fashion filmmakers understand the history of their
discipline”.1 Looking at “two parallel moments of fashion and film in the early 20th and 21st centuries”2, moments where new technologies of what Zielinski calls “audiovision”3 come to redefine both cinema and the fashion industry, the conference aimed to establish media archaeology as a key set of tools to explore both historical and current contexts for fashion films and their conversation with what the Conference Programme calls “contemporary audiovisual aesthetics”.

Popularized in Media Studies notably by Jussi Parikka, media archaeology has become an essential set of methodologies to construct alternative film and media histories.4 First, media archaeology has shown itself particularly adept at re-inscribing the discards of traditional film histories and the “weird objects” of film history.5 Fashion films, with typically short shelf-lives, and scattered among many different forms - from feature or short fiction films to magic films to newsreels to marketing films - constitute just such typical forms and fragments of what Jussi Parika at the conference called “excerpt cinema”. In this way, media archaeology has helped film and media history develop fruitful dialogues with a wide range of other histories, whether wider audiovisual genealogies (histories of data6, communication7, the history of “imaginary media”8), the history of raw materials and rare earth minerals9, of spiritualism10, or of the histories of ephemeral cultural objects such as toys.11 In all these forms, it has helped create complex genealogies and championed understandings of film in its full cultural materiality. As such, media archaeology would seem to be particularly suited to an understanding of the history of the fashion film, situated at the interface of various industrial and technological histories. One of the key successes of this conference was indeed the creation of a convincing argument for a social and industrial genealogy for the fashion film.

Exemplary of this generosity of research methodologies and concerns inherent in media archaeology, and of its natural affinity for “anarchaeology” – the “option to gallop off at a

1 For more information on the research project, see http://www.arts.ac.uk/research/current-research/ual-research-projects/fashion-design/archaeology-of-fashion-film/.
2 The Conference programme is available at http://events.arts.ac.uk/event/2018/7/6/Archaeology-of-Fashion-Film/.
3 Siegfried Zielinski, Audio visions: Cinema and Television as Entr’Actes in History (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1999).
tangent” that Zielinski has proposed as central to the work of media archaeologies— the first Keynote Address, by Wanda Strauven (Goethe University, Frankfurt) sought to construct a non-linear understanding of the history of film and fashion film in dialogue with the history of the loom and other machinery of import for textile industries. Entitled ‘Text, Texture, Textile: A Media-Archaeological Mapping of Fashion and Film’, Strauven’s presentation offered a non-linear genealogy of media and the sewing machine, both as inscription devices (graphein) operating on textile (the screen as cloth, celluloid advertised as garment material in the 1880s, or as material for ping pong balls until 2014). Her mapping focused on a series of “nodes” where film and media history came to encounter fashion and textile history, where genealogies crossed and inter-pollinated.

Examples included Lyon (where both the Lumière projector/camera and the Jacquard loom were invented), espionage (both in terms of industrial espionage in the history of reverse engineering of movie cameras and projectors from competitors’ models in the 1870s-1890s, and in the form of women in Belgium knitting secret codes for the Belgian resistance during World War 1), or gender, with the particularly important place occupied by women in both early film industry (notably in the production processes) and in fashion industries (the umbrella as fashion accessory and magic screen in early Méliès films). This rich and provocative genealogy raised a central concern around the question of the materiality of the film image: as the result of a technology of both presence and absence, of on the one hand a technology of fixing (images on celluloid, patterns on textile) and of punching holes (with provocative links made here between the Jacquard loom and early computing cards). This, she suggested, would be an issue that would seem to be just as central to an archaeology of the fashion film as disembodied spectacle of consumption and desire.

The remaining two keynotes of the day offered two different ways to conceptualize this inscription of the fashion film and attempted to illustrate one of the key strengths of the methods of media archaeology: the bringing together of two different historical periods on the look-out for confluences, surprises, echoes – the circular, additive, non-linear “lurches” that, according to Parikka, inform both film history and fashion history. In ‘The Paradox of Contemporary Fashion Film’, Nick Rees-Robert (University of Paris – Sorbonne Nouvelle) offered “a whirlwind tour of what the fashion film is today”. His presentation offered evidence that as an object of film study the fashion film remains elusive and paradoxical, ranging from fragments of feature films to Instagram posts. Fundamentally this is a form, he argued, held in a tension between the non-narrative display mode and narrative embedding, between visual continuities of coherent aesthetics and playful or arresting discontinuities of editing, between art and branding. Beatrice Behlen, for her part, in a presentation entitled ‘Floating Chiffon and Misty Tulle: The Materiality of Fashion in Motion’, focused on a 1918 Pathé film fragment – “a banal snippet of film”, as she put it - that shows British high society ladies parading clothes on a windy day in a London garden.

Frustrated by her experience, as a curator at the Museum of London, of displaying old clothes “as corpses”, and looking to film “to re-animate dress objects in the archive” by showing the “movement of fashion”, she presented her careful and painstaking investigation

12 Zielinski, Deep Time of the Media, p. 27.
into the identities of the wearers of clothes in the 1918 fragment. While the society ladies of the film prove rather awkward as fashion models (unable, notably, to hold the "fashion line" twice in the excerpt, despite help from an impressively mustached military officer), their identification reminded the conference of the need to think of the fashion film not just, as the presentation generously showed, as vicarious experience of how the wind, fabrics and layers of clothing react together, but also as a marker in the social inscription and materiality of fashion and film. As its own object of study (and not just as a historical record of fashion), the fashion film deserves careful attention in terms of who produces it, for what audiences, with what kinds of audience engagement in mind – an interrogation as valid now as it was a century ago.

The conference offered a fascinating window on the research project as a whole. Where a media archaeology of the fashion film might seem to prove most fruitful is first in its non-linear exploration of the recurrences, recursive structures, and other tropes that can be found across the history of fashion films (the fashion line, the walk, the Zoetrope-like rotation of figures). As an eclectic sample of fashion films produced from 1908 to 2018 (curated by Lucy Moyse Ferreira) reminded the conference, there is scope for a careful mapping of the forms and discourses of fashion films, their evolution, borrowings, and citations, to expand our understanding of how early cinema may enter into conversation with contemporary digital aesthetics in its ‘post-cinema’ moment, and to start mapping a more formal aesthetic history of commercial films. Second, an investigation along the lines offered by Wanda Strauven’s alternative genealogies, looking at the parallel histories of emerging technologies of the image and emerging structures and technologies of industry, would also seem to offer intriguing opportunities for a cross-investigation of film with social, industrial, cultural and, today, digital forces. By focusing on the typically ephemeral, peripheral form of the fashion film, at the intersection of art, commerce, consumption, fantasy and desire, the research project can be expected to offer a significant and original contribution to our understanding of cultural forces that have shaped cinema history.